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SIERRA SAM, THE FRONTIER FERRET; Or, A SISTER'S DEVOTION.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, "GILT-EDGED DICK," "BONANZA BILL," ETC., ETC.



AND AS THE COLLISION CAME, THE TWO DUELISTS REACHED BLINDLY FORWARD AND EACH STRUCK TWO RAPID BLOWS.

Sierra Sam, THE FRONTIER FERRET;

OR,
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CHAPTER I.

LADY LIL, THE ROAD-AGENT.

"OLD gent, it cannot avail you anything to hesitate. The stage is covered by enough rifles to riddle it, and if you don't hand over your cash, chattels an' jewelry, why I shall most certainly have the horses shot, and you will be even more at our mercy. Then you will perhaps find that Lady Lil, the road-agent, holds the winning hand!"

The words came in soft, persuasive tones, which, for all, were an authoritative command.

The speaker stood five feet five in the hand—some top-boots that reached above the knees, and were met by a pair of light gray trousers, belted at the waist with a gold-buckled strap, containing a revolver and a knife in addition to the one held ready for use in the outstretched hand. Then followed a velvet vest, a spotless white shirt front containing a blazing diamond pin, and a jaunty jacket trimmed with gilt fringe and brass buttons.

A mask from the forehead down to the point of the nose, and a white sombrero, turned jauntily up on one side, completed the noticeable habiliments of the individual, who stood beside a halted stage-coach, in a gloomy mountain cut, and "held" the aforesaid coach, by keeping a cocked revolver leveled upon Dutch Pete Priggins, the veteran Jehu.

Finely formed, and contoured not unlike a woman, was this "gent of the road"; his posture and motions were both easy and graceful; the shoulders and chest were broad enough to denote strength; what of the face could be seen was fair and finely chiseled; the mouth was decidedly a handsome feature, being capable of winning expression, now and then exposing a glimpse of even, pearly teeth; a graceful mustache upon the lip looked out of place there somehow; the eyes that gleamed through the holes in the mask were of piercing power and magnetism.

From beneath the broad rim of the hat, behind, flowed a wealth of wavy hair, down over the shoulders, whose color was of a decidedly golden tint.

So much for the person who had stopped the Bowieville stage, and had uttered the initial words of the chapter we write—the graceful, dashing and composed knight of the road, who had announced him or herself, as the case might be, as "Lady Lil."

For none there were, outside of her own band, in those wild mountain districts, who knew for a certainty whether the bold and daring Lady Lil was really a woman, or a man claiming the title to disguise his identity.

The graceful figure, the white hands and fair complexion, and the soft voice, indicated the womanly; while the daring deeds and unprecedented boldness of the outlaw chief were things seemingly masculine.

Yet all who had ever encountered Lady Lil were not prepared to vouch for a certainty as to what the sex was—and so, as a rule, Lady Lil was accredited as being "she" or "her."

"Yas, old shendts; der pest thing vot you can do ish valse oud your stambs, und let der stage go on!" Dutch Pete cried, from his perch on the box, immediately after the challenge of Lady Lil. "Id vas no more use to buck ag'in' dese road-agents, mine friends, dan vot it vas to ram your head mit der side off von mounting."

"We shall deliberate about the matter somewhat!" a voice cried out from the window of the door, and the head of an elderly gentleman protruded—a head with a full, red face, ornamented with a short gray beard, and hair to match—the head of a man who had fared sumptuously through life, evidently, and was now getting well along toward the end of his earthly pilgrimage. "If you want to know it, young man or woman, whichever you are, this coach contains six armed and desperate men!"

"You must have divided yourself into six distinct parts, then!" Lady Lil cried, good-naturedly, "for, to my positive knowledge, you and your lady and Dutch Peter, here, were the only humans about the stage when it

left Shantyville for Bowieville, and I'm pretty certain thar ain't any passengers, additional, been picked up twixt here and the former burg."

"You know too blamed much!" the old gentleman at the window growled. "Ef ye want to know it, road-agent, I've staged it these twenty years through the golden country, an' never surrendered or got robbed yet!"

"Then it's time you got initiated, now!" Lady Lil declared, with a strange chuckle. "You hadn't ought to growl at getting bled, once in awhile, after such luck. Come! business is business, an' we've got other work, yet, to-night. So tumble out of that coach, lively, or I'll have you taken out by force and lynched to the nearest tree! Boys!"

In answer to her call, half a dozen men—burly fellows they were, and similarly dressed and disguised—sprung from the undergrowth that bordered the trail, and surrounded their leader, with rifles leveled on the stage.

"Surrender! Get out of the coach, or I'll order fire!" Lady Lil shouted.

"Yes; don'd vas pe foolishness, but yoost hand offer your valuables, an' not keeb der stage vaitin' here all night, vor I wants to git home!" cried Priggins.

The door of the coach opened, and the portly male occupant stepped out upon the rocky trail, with an indignant oath.

"This is an outrage—an infernal outrage on a prominent citizen!" he raved, flourishing his hands.

"That's the kind we go fer!" Lady Lil declared, coolly. "Poor pilgrims don't pan out profitable—besides they need all their ducats and dust fer bug-juice and grub. Et's you old timers who are bloated up with gout and money that we like to leech, you bet; so, just flip out your sundry scabs in lively shape."

"You'll not get rich!" the victim grunted. "I'm old Judge Berkley, frum Californy, an' I allus leave my stamps at home. Here's my old Peter Funk watch; ef ye can find any more, you're welcome!"

"Go through him, boys!" Lady Lil said, stepping toward the coach. "I'll try the gal. There's money in the crowd, somewhere, an' I know it. The Berkleys of California don't travel empty-handed, you bet!"

Within the coach sat the other passenger—a young lady, wrapped in a long duster, and her face veiled.

Lady Lil gazed at her, a moment, with a half sneer; then, she thrust her revolver forward, until the veiled girl uttered a scream of terror.

"Oh! cowardly, eh?" Lil said, sarcastically. "I always imagined the fair and haughty Louise Berkley to be a woman of bravery. But, then, we are all liable to mistakes. I'll take your jewelry, if you please!"

"I have none!" the girl gasped, evidently greatly frightened; "indeed I haven't anything of value except the clothing I wear."

"Indeed, you lie!" Lady Lil declared, her tones hardening to sternness, not unmasculine. "You have diamond rings, diamond crosses and gold bracelets set with diamonds. Hand them over, or I'll have to let my men search you!"

A moment the veiled girl hesitated; then she took the articles from her person, and threw them into the road-agent's face.

Lady Lil laughed, mockingly.

"I wouldn't mind being stoned with diamonds every day in a week," she said, as she picked up the valuable ornaments, that lay in the moonlight of the early evening.

"But it shouldn't grieve you to lose these baubles, because the great speculator, Berkley, has a mint of money to buy more with. By the way, raise your veil; I would like to see the reputed pretty face of the—the Louise!"

And there was another ring of sarcasm in the speaker's tone.

Louise Berkley shrunk back.

She evidently feared to come into closer contact with this bold road-agent, who bossed the Bowieville trail pretty much as if it was her own.

"Oh! you needn't be skeert," with a masculine laugh; "I shall not disturb you, as we shall undoubtedly meet again. *Au revoir!*"

Then the road-agent leader turned to where the others had just finished searching Judge Berkley.

"Nary a thing more'n the watch, captain," one of them said, gruffly. "Nothin' but a check-book, which we don't want."

"Certainly not. Queer that a man of your stamp should travel without spondulics!" Lady Lil said, to Berkley. "Let me tap your hat, once!"

And she quickly lifted the shiny plug from his head, exposing to view in the moonlight an even more shiny bald pate, whereon was but an edging of the silvered hair.

The judge uttered a curse as he saw the captain rip out the lining of his hat, and likewise a pad of bills.

"Curse your picture!" he roared. "I'll never leave here until I have that money!"

"You'll have a jolly time in lingerin' around this vicinity, then!" Lil replied, thrusting the money into her pocket, and then giving his hat a kick into the air. "There's your old plug; now get you into the 'hearse' in the liveliest manner you know how, or I'll tickle your toes with a fusilade of bullets!"

And, as good as her word, she began firing at his feet, which were of no insignificant size.

Nearly frightened out of his wits, the Californian ran wildly and tumbled into the coach, after which Lady Lil turned and motioned for Dutch Pete to drive on.

"Oh! thunder! but I'll pay ye fer this outrage!" the judge shouted, sticking his head out of the window, as the coach rolled away; "I'll pay you, cuss yer picters! I'll live to see you swingin' fer your crimes, you infernal cut-throats!"

"Ta! ta! old full-moon!" Lady Lil yelled back, merrily. "Better take in yer bald pate, or it'll get tanned, or ketch cold!"

"Is thar any galoot in this hyar shebang who wants ter fight—any festive individual who's itchin' ter rub ag'in' ther tail of a comet or the fore-gear uv an' arthquake—any pilgrim who wants blood an' wants et bad? Ef thar is, hyar am I, Gouger & Co., ther King o' ther Kolorados, ready to mutilate an' dissect any sech specimen o' the human race as may want killin'!"

The words were uttered in a loud, brawling tone by an individual who stood in the doorway of the principal saloon of Bowieville, whose front walls bore the following inscription:

"THE GALOOT'S GOAL!"

"IF YOU'RE FLUSH HYER'S WHERE TO DEPOSIT!"

"INTEREST PAID ONLY ON LONG TIME."

"IF YOU'RE BROKE—STAY OUTSIDE!"

"CAP IS BOSS HYER!"

Just below the above was the following:

"P. S. No tombstones or shrouds furnished in cases of accidents!"

The man who stood in the doorway of the Galoot's Goal was a giant, standing fully six feet six in his boots, and of massive body and great muscular, brawny limbs.

Indeed, he looked as if he could knock down an ox with one of his ponderous fists.

His attire simply consisted of a heavy pair of top boots, a mud-splashed pair of pants, and a greasy red shirt, which gaped open at the neck, exposing a part of his broad, hairy breast.

He was possessed of a large, fiery-looking face, the chin being partly covered with a long goatee, as black as coal; his mouth was large and sensual; his eyes, dark and evil, were set in under a pair of ominous overhanging brows; nature had made his complexion dark and exposure had helped to add to its swarthinness; his hair was worn long and capped by a ragged, greasy sombrero.

Within the Galoot's Goal there were, at the time, quite a number of people of the various classes that go to make up the population of the average mining town; yet none of these rough and rugged fixtures of Bowieville's red-hot environs had, apparently, ever seen the giant stranger, and of one accord they did not seem to desire to have anything to do with him.

"Bad" men there were in Bowie, as it was more commonly known—men who never took a bluff tamely, or refused a chance to fight; but, somehow, just at this particular instant, none of them appeared to be on hand.

Galoot's Goal was, in the interior, a long, narrow room—say thirty feet wide by a hundred and fifty long.

At the extreme further end was a long bar, well furnished—something not to be said of many a mining town. Next, looking toward the front, were a number of tables used for lunch; then came a faro table, several smaller card tables, each furnished with rude chairs; then a pool table and a keno layout.

More chairs and tables were then arranged nearer to the front door.

A few were playing poker at the small tables; a game of faro was going on at the "bank,"

and a girl, young and pretty, was practicing at the pool table, as the giant made his advent in the doorway and sung out his challenge.

All eyes were turned toward him in a scowling glance, but no one appeared inclined to answer.

"Kerwhoop! I ain't wanted in this hyer highcockolorum shebang, eh?" he roared. "Well, neow, cuss my mule's capacity fer oats ef that ain't ther very time I'm with yer, tooth, claw an' toe-nail, wi' revolvers throwed in!"

And into the Galoot's Goal the giant strode, glaring around him wildly.

"I want blood!" he howled, jumping upon the nearest table, and whirling his hat on high—"I want chyle—gore!—anything pertaining to crimson! I'm a cannibal—a reg'lar old hyperbolic double-charged Fejee—a snortin', cavortin', howlin' hyena from the jungles o' Jungapore or any other pore! I want ter fight—I want ter shute—I want ter bite off some one's ear, cut out some one's heart, or gouge out an eye, just ter give me exercise; an' my name's Jake Gouger, the king-bee kuss o' ther Kolerados!"

"You're a big overgrown braggart and ruffian, and you'll oblige me very much, if you'll get out off of that table, and leave my establishment!" a voice cried, and Gouger gazed down in surprise, and beheld the girl, who at the time of his entrance had been engaged in practicing at the pool-table!

CHAPTER II.

SIERRA SAM ARRIVES.

THE border-ruffian was astonished!

He had traveled the golden country from Deadwood to Leadville, and from Helena to Del Norte, and won his spurs in every town as a "ruffian among ruffians;" yet he had never until this juncture, been faced by womankind of the order that now confronted him.

Not over eighteen or nineteen was the girl, for such she evidently was, and possessed of a form that was a perfection of symmetry and rounded grace, and arrayed in a full suit of spotless white duck—coat, pants, vest, ruffled white shirt, in the bosom of which blazed a diamond-cross worth a small mint of money; then she wore a dainty pair of high-topped patent leather boots, and a snow-white sombrero, set back jauntily upon a small finely shaped head, boasting of a wealth of soft dark-brown hair, and a face that was in an emphatic sense beautiful. Perfectly molded, it was, and rounded, by nature's gentle hand, with a fair fresh complexion, dark expressive eyes, and a mouth of tempting appearance, while an otherwise high forehead was partly hidden in under a graceful arrangement of natural frizzes that could but enhance the attraction the young woman possessed.

Indeed, Gouger could not remember of having seen a woman, ever before, who was half so pretty.

Brawling, blatant ruffian though he was, to the heart's core, with scarcely a humane or refined gift of nature within his gigantic carcass, he could but stare in speechless admiration at the girl, who had addressed him, and who stood surveying him, with a cool imperative glance.

"Waal, may I be chawed up by white winged whales!" he finally ejaculated; "I never know'd ther ekal on't before, since ther time Noah bounced me out o' the ark, fer chawin' the ear off 'n an elephant. Who d'ye calculate ye aire, young chap?"

"I'm the precise individual who runs this establishment, and my name is Cap!" the beauty answered, calmly, "and as we don't know you, or don't permit ear-chawing or blood-letting round here, the best thing you can do is to scoot—puckachee—light out!"

"Sh! Ye don't tell me!" the ruffian answered, with a leer. "Ain't Gouger & Co.'s money jest as good as any other galoot's, in this hyar camp? Say, you young child in men's togs—ain't my spondulics just as good as any other pilgrim's?"

"No. We do not want your money," the girl replied, firmly. "All I want of you is to leave. I've heard of Jake Gouger, before!"

"Oh! ye hev, hev ye?" the giant grinned, evidently feeling complimented. "I didn't know that my fame had reached even ter Bowie, I didn't. But, I tell ye what, ther great blood-spiller o' ther border is known frum Alphabet ter Omega—the gory Gouger of gougers, aire I—an' I can lick any ten galoots in this hyar ranch, fer love, or money!"

"Are you going to vamoose?" Capitola demanded, sternly.

"No, I ain't!" Gouger declared. "I kim

down hyar ter Bowie ter clean out ther fightin' cocks o' yer town, an' I shall melt right down in my boots in mortification at yer lack o' courage, ef some one don't kick up a fuss—knock off my hat fer instance, tread on my toes, or spit in my ear. That's the kind of a bivalve I aire! I want gore, I do, an' want it bad. But, thet ain't all I want, my beauty; I'm goin' ter have er kiss!"

And before the astonished manageress of the Galoot's Goal could make a move to defend herself, Gouger had leaped from the table, and caught her in his embrace.

"Help! help!" Capitola cried, for, brave girl though she was, and used to thrilling scenes of frontier peril, she was now really alarmed.

The giant held her so tightly she could not move, and glared down into her face, with a gloating expression.

"Ho! ho! my pretty bird!" he chuckled; "ye'll order yer unkle what to do, wull ye? Gouger & Co., who's swallered more nor a hundred sech little critters like you? I've a mind to slap yer mouth, instead o' kissin' it?"

"Help! help!" Cap cried, struggling with all the strength she had. "Will no one release me from this ruffian!"

A number of the miners left the gaming-tables, and came forward, but holding the girl in one arm, Gouger drew a large revolver from his belt, and leveled it at them, defiantly.

"Cum on, ye durned durt-diggers, ef ye want a cemetery started in this hyer town. I'm just b'ilin' fer blood, I aire, an' w'u'd just as leafe spill yourn as any one else's. So sail right inter this hyar funeral, ef ye want fun—admission free!" the big brute roared, flourishing his cocked weapon, dangerously.

The men hesitated. Most of them had heard of Gouger, before, and in a way not calculated to make them especially fearless of him. The "bully" men of many a mining-camp had he "cleaned out," and lived to brag of it; and, therefore, it was no wonder that wherever he went, he was known and feared.

Not exactly anxious therefore, were the occupants of the Galoot's Goal to incur the wrath of the giant, even while it angered them to see him holding struggling Capitola, whom every man in Bowie liked and respected, for there were none who could say a truthful word against the girl's character, except that she ran the Goal, and was an expert gamester, and knew how to take care of herself.

"You'd better release the young lady, my friend!" a miner named Ben Haverly cried, decidedly. "If you come here to run the camp, you'll find you can't do it!"

"Hey? Can't I? Waal, I should vomit up an alligator ef I don't, tho'!" Gouger cried. "Jes' wait 'til I kiss ther gal, hyar, an' cuss my mule's eye-teeth ef I don't show 'ye ther sort o' a harpoon Gouger & Co. is!"

And bending, the ruffian imprinted a smack upon Capitola's lips—then another, and another, till—

The girl screamed with actual terror. How long the brute's insults might have continued—for the crowd stood looking on, aghast—is hard to say, had not a man, who had entered, unnoticed, a few minutes before, now leaped forward, and dealt the giant a terrible blow between the eyes, which caused him to release his hold upon the girl, and go crashing to the floor, insensible.

"Gentlemen of Bowievill, I am heartily ashamed of you!" this new-comer cried, assisting weak and trembling Capitola to a chair, and then turning sternly to the gaping crowd. "What are you? Is there no manhood in your party, at all, that you will stand by and see a defenseless girl insulted by a human beast? By my soul, I never knew the equal of the thing in my life!"

A grunt of disapproval went up from the crowd. Evidently they did not appreciate this home-thrust.

"I reckon ye don't know what fer man thet Gouger is, 'squire!" one man volunteered to say, acting as spokesman for the rest. "We war in favor o' helpin' Cap out, but we warn't purtic'lar 'bout bein' laid up fer er funeral!"

"Valiant heroes, every one of you!" the stranger retorted. "I'd go and pack my traps for some Eastern farm, ef I were you, where you would have to fight nothing but geese and mosquitoes. Ha! ha!"

And the man laughed sarcastically, as he took a cigar from his pocket and proceeded to light it.

"You mustn't get r'iled at me, if I'm a little sarcastic, pilgrims," he added, "fer I'm a sarcastic guss at best—especially so, when I see a galoot flinchin' frum duty; so, come along up

and drink with me, and call it a hand shake, fer I allow Sierra Sam's a man c'lar through!"

And there was not a man in the crowd who would have admitted a doubt about the matter, despite the fact that the dashing stranger had given them a rough rub, to start with.

He was evidently not yet out of his twenties, possessed of a strong graceful figure of just a trifle over the medium stature of men, in which muscular development and agility of motion were noticeable features.

His face was almost boyish, so young, round and fresh it was, in its manly beauty.

A graceful mustache ornamented his upper lip, waxed to a point at the end, and a slight tuft of hair grew beneath his lower lip. His mouth was firm, yet by habit, pleasant of expression, and a midnight pair of eyes gleamed in under his brows—a powerful, brilliant pair of orbs, that could seemingly read a person, through and through. His hair, after the prairie scout fashion, was worn long, down over his shoulders, and was of a dark brown color.

All in all, he was by far the handsomest man who had ever set foot in Bowie Gulch, and it was evident that great bravery and a wild, reckless and daring disposition was coupled with manly beauty, in this instance, although as a rule, such is not apt to be the case.

And any momentary affront the miners may have taken at the bluff introductory of the stranger, was immediately forgotten, when he "hit 'em on a tender spot," by asking the crowd to "have something."

"Drink? On course we will, pardner!" a little shriveled-up and dirty individual cried, whose appearance was decidedly shabby genteel. "I'll vouch for the rest, on my own responsibility. My name is Mugg—Jeremiah Mugg, and I am a lawyer. So if you have any legal business to transact, I shall be happy to accommodate you in a perfeshional capacity!"

"I reckon I sha'n't need you, unless I happen to murder the big giant, and need counsel for defense," Sierra Sam replied, dryly. "Hey! Jeff, you rascal, where are you, sir?"

"Heah, boss!" came the answer, and the black pate of a ducky appeared in the doorway of the Galoot's Goal. "Heah I is, boss. Am de situation safe, fo' dis heah coon?"

"Oh, yes! Come along, without any fear," Samuel of the Sierras replied. "I'm goin' to set 'em up, and I know you never refuse."

"No, sah! No, sah!" the ducky agreed, hastily entering the saloon, but giving a suspicious glance around him, and at the outstretched giant, to satisfy himself that no trap was being laid for him. "I'll take cognac brandy for mine, boss, wid a straw in it—yes, sah!"

A queer looking companion for the handsome man—this ducky, and a most comical-visaged specimen of the colored race too, with a bulldog head, a big pair of eyes, the whites of which rolled ludicrously, and a pair of thick lips, that, when parted, exposed to view two rows of pearly teeth.

He was equipped in livery, and a plug hat, and would have looked decidedly more at home as footman of some eastern city gentleman of leisure, than as companion of a man of Sierra Sam's caliber.

"Gentlemen!" the sport said, "allow me to make you acquainted with my right-hand man, Jefferson Davis Dump, whom you'll find a jolly good fellow, despite his tan. Jeff is a daisy in everything, except bravery; there's no bigger coward living—got the same disease you fellows are troubled with—ha! ha! ha! Drink hearty, gents—

"Here's to the tough
Who tried to kiss Cap;
I hit him a whack
And he went down ker-slap!"

"Mr. Dump, allow me to introduce myself—my name is Mugg, and I am a lawyer."

"Yas, sah! Happy to meet you, Mugg!" the gentleman of color assented, loftily. "Youb look jes' like a lawyer, sah, fo' suah. Youb mugg is de puffec' impussonation ob de law, sah!"

"Ah! thank you—thank you," the dapper individual returned; then as Sierra Sam and the crowd moved away from the bar—"do you know the gentleman with the long hair, sir?—know him well?"

Jefferson drew himself up to his fullest height. "Know dat fellah? Sho! I guess so! Dat's my boss, dat is, fo' suah, an' you bet youh life he's de reg'lar ole sorgham-sugah of a boss, too."

"Ah! yes, undoubtedly. S'pose he is a man of importance."

"Golly, I jess guess so. You orter jes' see dat fellah clean out de folks he don't like, suah! He jes' pulverizes 'em—'deed he does; an' he ain't no moah 'feared of any man or anymal dan I is of a Thomas cat."

"Lots of money, eh?"

"Dead loads of it, sah—more dan fifty million dollars right about his duds, for suah!"

Whether Mugg believed this or not, is hard to say; his smooth, unwrinkled face was a hard page to make anything out of.

"And what may his name 'be, aside from Sierra Sam; Sam what?" he asked, gazing toward the faro-table, where the stranger stood watching the game.

"Dunno, sah—dunno noffin more!" Jeff replied, suspiciously. "Bid youh good-evenin', sah. Town pump on de corner, sah, if you want to work it!"

And then he strutted off, importantly, while Mugg bit his lip, in vexation.

"The devilish nigger knows enough to keep his master's secret, at any rate," he muttered, growlingly.

He turned to the bartender, who was a flat-visaged Chinaman with almond eyes of a keen and intelligent sparkle.

"Did the galoot pay you good money for the drinks?" Mugg interrogated, eagerly.

"Melican man muchee square," Sing-Low replied, wiping off the bar. "No fooler John Chinaman with bad money, allee samee."

"You want to look out for him. I'll warrant he's a scaly customer, and hasn't come to Bowie without a purpose. Ef ye s'picion him of any unfair or illegal biz, Sing, ye jess want ter put yer unkle enter it. Ye see, ef I succeed in makin' a 'case,' I've the prospects o' gittin' promoted to U. S. detective here, at a salary. So help me along if you can."

And the lawyer slipped some money into the barkeeper's hand, which was promptly pocketed.

At this juncture there was a great bellow, as the giant sat up and rubbed his now swollen head.

"What mule kicked me?" he roared. "What's the matter? Show me the man who hit me with the sledge-hammer, so that I kin chaw him up an' swaller him—me, Gouger & Co., the ferocious Feejee Cannibal!"

CHAPTER III.

AND A GREAT MAN FALLETH.

NOT an answer to his interrogative did the giant get, although all eyes in the room were turned toward him, while the young girl Capitola, hastened over to the vicinity of where Sierra Sam was standing, as if expecting that he would protect her from further insult at the hands of the ruffian.

Sam took a moment just then to give her a searching glance, and his admiration for the handsome proprietress of the Galoot's Goal shone out in his gaze.

She was just the type of womanhood he admired, unconventional and pretty, and brave to a fault; he was the very acme of her mind's ideal of a hearty, noble manhood. No wonder, then, that when their glances met there was a warm expression of admiration in each other's gaze that brought a flush at least to the girl's cheek, if not to the sport's, for he turned his face quickly away.

Gouger & Co. had by this time scrambled to his feet, still feeling of his forehead, and was glaring around ferociously for a subject to launch his wrath upon.

"Hello! I say!" he repeated in his blatant way, "what was et thet hit me atwixt the eyes? Show me the galoot with fists like a sledge-hammer, while I pulverize him into bone-dust an' soap-grease!"

"See hyar, pard!" he added, the next moment, as his eyes rested for the first time upon the man of the Sierras, "et kinder strikes me you're the identercal pilgrim w'at did the job—pasted me a sockdolager between the peepers thet made me see more than ten milyun long-tailed comets!"

"It kinder strikes me that way, too, my friend!" Sam replied, with a smile. "I reckon I took you in for the extent of your floor measure, eh?"

"Darn my mule's capacity fer oats, yes. I could hev swaered by ther liberty-pole o' Waterloo thet I'd bin kicked by the propeller uv a burro. An' so you're the nasty little insignificant morsel o' humanity who dared ter insult ther great blood-suckin' Feejee Cannibal o' Ner'-west, aire ye?"

And the giant stepped nearer, his face flaming with rage, and his hands opening and shutting convulsively.

"Yes, I'm the very man!" Sam replied, grim-

ly. "I caught you in the act of insulting an unprotected lady, you overgrown loafer, and I applied my knuckles promptly between your eyes and 'raised you one better!'"

"Great sufferin' Moses!" the giant gasped, swelling with rage. "An' ye did this, knowin' thet I war the famous gouger of gougers—ther King o' Kolerado—ther Sampson uv all supreme smashers? Ye hev ther face ter stan' an' tell me this? Oh! Lordy! what shall I do with ye?—how will ye take it? Shall I chaw ye up an' swaller ye, or shall I mop up the floor o' this hyar shebang with yer carcass, till thar won't be enuff uv yer to fill a holler tooth with! Speak quick, an' nominate yer choice, fer sumthin' must be did, or I shall bu'st—kersplode right hyar!"

"You'd better screw down your throttle or you'll get out of steam before you know it," the Californian replied, coolly. "If you're itching to snag yourself ag'in' a small pocket-edition of an earthquake, mebbe you better try the floor-mopping experiment and see how it will work."

"Yas; I will, an' I'll wring gore out o' the rags o' my mop when I get through, cuss ye!" the ruffian yelled, leaping forward.

So spry were his movements despite his ponderous size, that nothing was left for Sierra Sam but to clinch with him, as he had no time to get in a telling blow.

With murmurs of wonderment the crowd drew back and gave the two strangely-contrasted opponents the floor, for they saw it was to be a desperate struggle for the mastery, and the odds looked discouragingly against the man from the Sierras.

"A thousand dollars here to bet that Sierra Sam gets teetotally kerlapsed an' licked this trick," the lawyer, Mugg, yelled, flourishing a roll of money in his hand.

"Take you, sah!" Jeff Davis Dump quickly responded, taking a huge roll of money from his pocket. "Put up youh money, sah—in de young lady's hands, sah."

Mugg gazed at the darky a moment, astounded. He had not intended to bet at all, being well satisfied that there were few pilgrims in Bowie so flush of stamps as to care to risk so high a stake on an uncertain issue.

"Guess I don't care to bet with a nigger—oh, no," he said, weakening. "I don't want your money, sir; put it back."

"Come, come, Mugg—that ain't fair," Capitola cried, indignantly, drawing a pistol. "You're so flush with your sand, just you put up now. The dark's just as good as you are, and so's his money, and if you don't stand square to your own proposal, I'll salivate you as sure as I'm Cap Carson."

And the girl evidently meant it too, for she leveled her weapon at the disciple of Blackstone threateningly.

"The devil take you! I'm not going to fool away a thousand dollars just because you say so," he growled, hesitatingly.

"Put up right here in my hand or I'll plug you," the girl persisted, sternly. "You know me, Mugg—I never lie. You didn't come honest by that money, and the coon's going to have a share fer his shekels."

"Cuss you, I'll get even with you for this," the pettifogger hissed, coming to time and depositing his money in Capitola's hand, after which Dump covered it. "I see thru the hull thing, girl; you're struck after the sport, an' want to gain his favor by puttin' my money in his nigger's paws."

"You lie!" the girl retorted, giving him a push. "If you win the money shall be yours."

All this while the men were still clinched—locked together by the gripe of their powerful arms, and performing an impromptu waltz, neither one seeming to have gained an advantage through the embrace.

"Oh, squeeze if you like!" Sierra Sam chuckled, as the giant tried to crush the breath out of him by a terrible hug. "You'll perhaps learn that a little fish can swim nearly as far as a big one."

And then he returned the hug with interest, until the bully fairly groaned with agony.

"Let up, for God's sake!" he gasped, hoarsely. "You're cavin' my ribs in!"

"Ha! ha! that's no hug, Gouger!" the Californian replied; "that's simply a sweetheart hug they ha'e up in the Sierras. Now, here's a real old-fashioned Hoosier hug, right from Indiana, you bet!"

And instead of lessening his terrible squeeze about the giant's waist, the man-remarks increased it, until the overgrown bully roared loudly and loosened his gripe, brandishin' his arms wildly and gasping for breath.

That was the moment of real action for the apparently cool and smiling Californian.

At one side of the room stood an open-topped cask, still partly filled with coal tar, which had been used for roofing purposes.

The eagle gaze of Sierra Sam had observed this when he entered the saloon; he now gave it another glance, his eyes gleaming wickedly.

Quickly raising the giant from the floor, and still increasing the vise-like nature of his powerful hug, he moved forward, and ere anybody had quite comprehended his intention, he dextrously whopped the giant over and chucked him, head-foremost, down into the cask.

Allowing him to remain there but a second, he drew him out, and then tumbled him roughly to the front door.

A worse-looking object certainly never graced the mountain-environed town of Bowieville.

From the top of his head to the arm-pits was one mass of tar, and the only wonder was how the poor galoot could get his breath.

But he had been wise enough to keep his eyes, mouth and nostrils shut during the souse.

Outside of the door of the Galoot's Goal he lay upon his back on the ground and kicked and thrashed about with his feet and hands, while the crowd gathered around and roared and shrieked with laughter.

"Some one who wants to earn five dollars bad, clean the poor devil off!" Sierra Sam said, "and just remark to his Gouger-ship that if he ain't satisfied yet, he'll find me in the saloon until eleven."

At this moment the stage-coach whirled down into the town and came to a halt close to where the tarred bully lay, and two passengers alighted—an elderly gentleman and a young lady.

"This way, Louise," the gentleman ordered, and the crowd parted to let them pass into the "hotel," the only one in Bowie, which adjoined the Galoot's Goal.

"Right this way, sir!" Jeremiah Mugg cried, stepping forward. "My name is Mugg and I'm a lawyer—only one in Bowie, sir—fees moderate. Allow me the honor of showing you the way to our only grub ranch, sir; right this way!"

"Dat yar Mugg ought to hab my boss, to teach him manners!" Jeff Davis Dump observed to a bystander. "Somehow dese ignorant pusses nebber will learn not to be too obfissus, nohow."

"Oh! papa! papa! do look here—for goodness sake! Isn't it a shame?—the poor fellow!" the young lady said, raising her veil and tugging at the old gentleman's coat-sleeve, while she pointed to poor Gouger. "Isn't it awful? Pray, who so maltreated the man?"

And the speaker's tones were imperious, as she turned her gaze upon the bystanders.

"Sierra Sam, ma'am—Sierra Sam!" Mugg hastened to exclaim, indicating the Californian, who stood in the saloon door, the moonlight shining full in his handsome face.

Louise Berkley gazed at him an instant; their eyes met in a glance of evident recognition; she grew strangely white, and turned hastily to the judge.

"Come, papa, let us find the hotel; I feel sickened at this disgusting sight."

And Mugg guided them into Bowie's hostelry, while Sierra Sam re-entered the Galoot's Goal, his eyes glittering strangely, and his face wearing a strange gloomy expression that was not usually seen there.

The only occupants of the room were Capitola, the charming proprietress, and another man of about Sierra Sam's age, and Sing-Low, the bartender.

Capitola and the first-mentioned man, who was well-dressed, and of prepossessing appearance, with a brown mustache and goatee, and rather handsome dark eyes, hair and features, were just about beginning a game of pool as the sport re-entered.

"Oh! hold on—here is my gallant rescuer, who must take a cue!" Capitola cried, running forward and seizing hold of his arm. "Now don't say you won't, sir, for I insist. A three-handed game is always the merriest, and this is for a hundred a side. And," she added, in an undertone, "if you don't know anything about the game, I'll favor you, for I want you to win. Your name is Mr.—"

"Slocum—Sam Slocum!" the sport replied, smiling down into her fairy-like face; "and, by the way, play your best, and let Sam'l 'tend to his own part of the game."

"Oh! I am so glad of that, Mr. Slocum,"—in a louder tone. "This is Mr. Max Montague, who owns the Little Sunshine mine up the gulch."

The two men acknowledged the introduction, with a bow.

"Mr. Montague, I do so want Mr. Slocum to come into the game, and I am sure you will not object!"

"Well, no—providing he wants to put up, equal!" Montague replied, indifferently.

Sierra Sam took a second look at the man, as if to read him, but Montague was busy arranging the balls.

"Presumedly, when I gamble, I 'put up,' as I never transact any business on tick!" he responded, curtly.

Montague did not reply, but there was a little scowl on his face as if he did not relish the retort, and Capitola pulled at Sam's coat-sleeve, as much as to say:

"For my sake, pick no quarrel with him."

At least, so Slocum took it, and remembered it.

The balls were now in position, and the dice shook, which gave Sierra Sam the lead.

The three hundred dollars, in bills, were then deposited in one of the chalk receptacles, and Sam took his cue.

"Now you must not laugh at me if I go at this business awkwardly," he said, smilingly, "for you know beginners have to learn, before they can hope to graduate. What is this—a regulation or a scratch game, not counting bucks? Either way to suit you—it's all alike to me."

"A scratch game of course!" Montague answered. "I never play regulation with professionals!" And there was a faint tinge of sarcasm in his tones.

Sam somehow felt inclined to break up his cue over the fellow's head, but remembering Capitola, he refrained.

"Well," he asserted, "just as you like. I'll start off with a vengeance, and a burst."

And he did too.

In bursting the balls, he pocketed the twelve, fifteen and seven balls, and left the other balls in fine shape.

With a faint smile lurking beneath his mustache, he began an attack upon the other balls, and when he placed his cue upon the table, all the balls, from one to fifteen were piled up in the corner and side pockets.

Montague uttered an oath, as Capitola took the money from the chalk cup, and handed it smilingly to Sierra Sam.

"I will quit I guess," the miner said, with not the best-natured grace, "as no man can play against such luck. Miss Carson, I will see you, again."

And raising his hat, he strode from the pool table out of the saloon, not even noticing Sierra Sam, as courtesy demanded. And as he passed out Jake Gouger once more entered the room!

CHAPTER IV.

A WOMAN'S POWER.

If the Cannibal of the Nor-west had looked badly when he made his unceremonious exit from the Galoot's Goal—his appearance was greatly changed, now.

Some of the humane miners of Bowie's ever-friendly burg, had re-attired the giant in a suit of overalls, at least three sizes too small for him, and by a judicious application of kerosene oil had cleansed his face and neck of the tarry daub that had recently decorated it, although a plency of the nasty stuff still clung into his hair.

Hatless, was the King o' the Kolorados, and looking at least ten per cent. less ferocious than was usual with him, as for the second time that night he made his way into the Galoot's Goal, and direct toward where Sierra Sam stood at the pool table, just engaging in conversation with the pretty proprietress.

"I trust you will pardon me for my forgetfulness in not thanking you for coming to my rescue, so bravely!" Capitola was saying, evidently a little confused, at the awkward situation Montague had left them in. "I am sure I am greatly indebted to you."

"Not in the least, lady. I merely performed a duty which your townsmen hesitated to tackle," Sam replied. "I am sure I wish you would often give me a chance to come to the assistance of one so pretty."

And he laughed, pleasantly.

"Oh! that is wishing me ill. I have plenty of ills to battle with, so, pray make a good wish, if any!"

"I certainly could not wish you harm. You occupy a strange position, here, for one who is apparently fitted for a higher position in life!"

"Do I?" And the girl's eyes were bent upon the floor, thoughtfully. "Well, perhaps I do. But, then, every one says I am an enigma, at best. I came here, when Bowie started, and started with it, and there's few but will tell

you I've always been able to look out for Number One."

"Indeed, no one could think any thing else, I am sure. Ah! here comes our friend, the roaring Fejee, recovered from his bath!"

"He is a bad man. He is a brute—in fact, the only man who has ever dropped down in camp, whom I had a horror of. Will he seek another quarrel? Oh! I do so hope you will not get hurt!"

And her little white jeweled hand clutched his coat-sleeve, and her eyes gazed up into his with an earnest glance, that thrilled him.

"Thank you," he said, returning the gaze with interest. "Do I look or act like a man who often gets left?"

And a faint smile hovered about his lips and gleamed from his handsome eyes.

"No, you do not," she responded, frankly. "You are a man-marvel—a man among men, whom—"

She did not finish the sentence; her gaze dropped, and she turned to the table to arrange the balls. But in that unfinished sentence the Californian read her secret, even as he realized the fact that she had attained a firmer hold upon his admiration than any other woman had ever done.

Gouger waltzed up at this juncture to within three paces of Sierra Sam, and stood gazing at him a moment with a strange, half humorous expression upon his homely visage.

"Stranger," he said, hoarsely, after a momentary pause, during which he looked the sport over from head to foot, "will ye allow me to open my mouth fer ther space of about a minute?"

So comical was the way in which the question was put, that Sam could not refrain from laughing.

"Well, I suppose this is a free country and everybody has the privilege of wagging jaw if they choose," he said, good-naturedly.

"Waal, then, ef you haven't any objections, I wan't to express my condemn'dest admiration fer you, I do. I wanten impress on yer tympanum the certain fact that Gouger & Co., the the King o' Kolorado, is a licked man—a tee-totally demolished disciple of a darned jack-ass. Et's a fac', sir, by ther stars an' stripes o' old Christopher Columbjy, an' et does me proud ter acknowledge ther corn, you bet. Seven-an'-forty years hev I roamed around these hyar golden western foot-hills, an' known no parallel as a bruiser—seven-an'-forty years hev I chawed up whatsoever specimen o' humanity as crossed my gory trail, as I would a chaw o' ter-baccy; an' never in all that time hes Jake Gouger, wi' all his stately conkerin' majesty, bin used as a swob fer tar-barrels ontill to-night—no sir-ee, never! An' now, a licked and humiliated galoot, I wanten, right hyar, afore I seek my virtuous couch, to shake hands wi' you across ther bloody chasm, an' call it squar' atwixt you an' me."

Sierra Sam gazed at the man with astonishment. He could not quite credit his sense of hearing; he was hardly prepared to believe that this noted bruiser and ruffian, of whom he had heard hard stories told long ere he set foot in Bowie, that this hard citizen of giant size and prodigious strength, who had cleaned out many a mining camp, should take water and admit his defeat in so humble a manner except he had a forthcoming scheme of vengeance to further, under the cloak of hypocrisy and pretended friendship.

But there was no treacherous light in the bully's eye; his whole demeanor was that of a man who had recognized his own disability, and was honest in his professed intention.

And when Gouger thrust forward his great, horny palm, the Californian did not take it.

"You'll excuse me, my friend," he said, "but before shaking hands with you there is one little thing you must necessarily do."

"Nominate it, captain—you proposeth an' I disposeth. Anything in ther hull catalogue o' impossibilities will I do, root hog or die, jest fer ther honor o' one friendly shake o' yer royal old sledge-hammer fluke, you bet."

"Very well. I want you to humbly apologize to the young lady here for the insult you gave her, then I've no objections to shaking hands with you as a gentleman."

"Gentleman—me? Oh, Lord A'mighty!" and the ruffian fairly gasped. "Pardner, you're hittin' me hard. Call me all ther mean things ye kin, but not a gentleman—that's orful. I'm nothin' but a human brute, an' no one but you could call me a gentleman 'thout r'ilin' me—no sir-ee. Thar was a time, years an' years ago, when thar war a chance for me, but arter the old gent an' lady pegged out I war put up on

ther world at public auction, an' whisky an' the devil bid me off. Yas, on course I'll do the squar' thing," and the giant dropped upon his knees in front of Capitola. "Lady, I humbly ax yer parding an' fergiveness. I do, honest Injun. Don't speak—I can't stand it; but ef you'll let me kiss ther tips o' yer pretty fingers, by ther great horned ace o' the Big Missouri, I'll try to be a better man."

"May Heaven help you to become one!" Capitola said, and she extended her fair shapely right hand—the dextrous hand that many a luckless miner could heartily wish he had never seen.

Gouger took it tenderly and gazed at it a moment, as if it were a great curiosity to him; then he raised it to his lips, released it, and arose to his feet, and with genuine tears coursing down his cheeks, turned and staggered from the saloon.

Rough and rugged miners, who had entered the place in time to see the strange tableau, stood grim and silent in awed wonderment—men who seldom were affected, if ever, to tears, and who were struck to see a man of Jake Gouger's dark repute in such a "weak" state.

Both Sierra Sam and Capitola were not a little affected and gazed after the giant thoughtfully.

"The man is deeply affected, or else he is a greater hypocrite than I ever met," Capitola said, toying with her watch-chain.

"His exhibition of feeling is genuine, I believe," the Californian replied. "It takes a man to fight a man, but a woman to conquer the human heart," and his eyes sought hers with an earnest expression.

She partly averted her face, upon which a soft blush dawned.

"And it remains for us to follow up the 'lead' we have struck and develop Gouger into a better man," she added.

Sierra Sam and Jeff Davis Dump, his trusted companion, soon after left the saloon and struck out for their ranch, for the night was well advanced toward the wee sma' hours.

Up the gulch, a hundred rods from the Galoot's Goal, was a small mountain lakelet, nestled down among the rugged mountains, and fringed with a scattering growth of spectral pines. Fed by a strong subterranean spring, the waters of this glassy pond found a way of escape by a narrow channel which ran down through the mining town, the major part of which was on the further side of Miss Carson's saloon.

Upon the shore of this little basin was a log cabin, which some miner had evidently built and deserted, and this Sierra Sam had taken possession of, without leave or license, as it boasted of a table, some stools, cooking utensils and a bed of leaves—all a miner's luxuries.

"Well, what do you think of our first night in Bowieville?" the Californian asked, as they strode along. "Rather a fly introductory, eh?"

"Yes, sah," the darky answered, taking off his hat and scratching his head. "I s'pec' dis yer chile is all mixed up, fo' suah, sah."

"What's wrong? Has anything extraordinary happened to disturb your equanimity, Jeff?"

"Yas, boss; I s'pect dar has. In de fust place, dar's dat yar Mugg. I tell youh, boss, you want to look out fo' him. He's defective hen-fruit, dat Mugg is, cl'ar thr'u'. Den dar's de fac' dat dis yar chile won a thousan', cool, by bettin', an' de fella' Mugg he done declar' dat de young leddy was dead gone on youh—yes, sah. An' den de general disturbance all around make dis nigger as upset as an elevated railroad, fo' suah."

"Pooh! you're too bad, Jeff. I shall have to steep you up a decoction of nervine, or you'll never live it out in this town. By the way, what do you think of the girl, Miss Capitola Carson?"

"Dunno, boss. She's cl'ar beauty on de outside, sure's dar's sugar in de cane; but den, boss, mebbe it's only skin-deep. Dar war Clem Johnsing's gal Suse, dat dis chile used to spark up. She was de berry purtiest gal in Turkeyville, fo' suah, wid eyes jes' as unresistable as der perfoomery ob de polecat—but, golly, boss, it wasn't no use at all, sah; she war jess de ficklest piece ob colored nigger you ebber see, an' de berry ebenin' afore she was to be married to me, sah, what did dat Susan Johnsing do but dun go an' elope wid Parson Joneses nigger, Jake!"

"Then you think if I was to try and win the pretty proprietress of the Galoot's Goal I'd get left, eh?"

"Deed I does, boss."

"And why so?"

"Ca'se she's got annudder beau, sah!"

"Ah! yes, I see. You refer to the fellow Montague."

"Dat's a fac', boss. She's struck after him, an' fishin' after youh spondulics."

"I can't quite agree with you, Jeff. I am of the opinion that she's a brave, pure-hearted girl, and I've quite a notion that her name wouldn't look bad written as follows: 'Mrs. Samuel Slocum!'"

Jeff put up his hands.

"Sho! Fo' de Lor' sake, boss, don't you do it!" he said, rolling his eyes ludicrously. "If youh done go get moonstruck after dat gal, I tell youh, sah, you won't be wuff three cents, by golly. An' youh recomember w'at we'se come to dese yar diggings for, boss?"

A cloud came over Sierra Sam's face.

The darky's words evidently reminded him of something unpleasant; and, too, Jeff's opinion was seemingly a matter of moment to him.

"I guess you're right," he said, as they reached the cabin. "To-morrow you can go to work a-prospecting among the rocks around the cabin here, while I'll bear in mind your advice."

The next day Sierra Sam staked out a claim close to the cabin, purchased tools, and set Jeff to work, after which he sauntered up into the town.

Was he going to Capitola's saloon?

He really did not know, himself.

Some irresistible impulse drew him into the camp, and, while he had about decided to keep away from the Galoot's Goal, he was secretly hoping that he might catch a glimpse of Capitola.

The first familiar face he came across belonged to Jeremiah Mugg.

With the assurance of a bosom friend, the pettifogger darted from a saloon and locked arms with the Californian, his face beaming with smiles and his breath smelling strongly of poor "coffin-nail," which, in Bowievill vernacular, signified whisky, although whisky would have blushed at the comparison, figuratively speaking.

"My dear Slocum, I am delighted to see you!" Mugg began, patting Sam familiarly on the shoulder with his disengaged hand. "I have been wishing to see you all the morning to tell you you are making an erroneous mistake—an erroneous mistake, sir!"

"Well, how so?" Sam demanded, rather shortly, not quite appreciating the lawyer's forwardness.

"Plain as the nose on your face, sir—every one's laughing at you. Why, the idea of you inhabiting the haunted cabin, that nobody can be hired to go near—and, also, of setting the nigger to work whar never a smidge of gold has been found—why, sir, you are mad!"

"Perhaps!" Sam replied, sarcastically. "When I'm mad, however, I have a cause for it, generally. So the cabin is haunted, eh?"

"Sure, sart'in. Jim Bacon was murdered thar, six months ago, an' his body thrown into the lake, an' now his speerit comes back, nights, an' howls around, villainous."

"Indeed! If Jim's 'float' gets unduly boisterous, I shall have to speak to him, and have him quiet down a little. As to the claim, I'll find gold there."

"Impossible, sir! Then, there's another thing, friend Sam'l, I must mention because of my interest in you. Beware how you are seen in conversation with Capitola, the girl gambler. She's under a cloud, you see; thar's divers things s'picioned 'g'in' her, you see—ahem! well I'll not say just what, but if you were to be took as her pard, it might go hard with you, byme-by—hemp-ingly speaking, you know!"

CHAPTER V.

OLD STORK'S PROPOSAL.

SIERRA SAM listened to the words of Jeremiah Mugg with silent indifference.

If Capitola Carson was under a cloud, was it any assurance that she was or was not guilty of crimes without number?

"And so, you'll at once see that it behooves you to be on guard!" Mugg added.

"Your advice is good, as far as it goes," Sam replied, "but I am not inclined to believe ill of a person until I have stronger proof of their guilt than the simple word of a lawyer, whose chief stock-in-trade, is misrepresentation."

And the Californian shook him off, and entered a grocery store to make some purchases.

Within the grocery—the only one, by the way, in Bowie—stood Jake Gouger, the late roarin' Cannibal o' the Nor'west.

Togged out from top to toe in a bran new suit of clothes was the giant, with a "plug" hat

upon his head, upon which was a mourning band.

He looked not the rough individual of the previous night, as he stood meekly at a freshly-opened cracker barrel, munching with great complacency.

"Hello, Gouger," the Californian accosted, frankly, extending his hand. "Hard at work, in a good cause, eh? Why the mourning-band—lost a relative?"

"Lordy, no. Thet 'ar's to tell whar Jim Gouger turned over a new leaf, arter bein' all broke up an' his spurs clipped as the King o' Kolorado."

Sam having made his purchases, left the saloon. Gouger following him to the door, tapped him on the shoulder.

"Young man," he said, "you're a brick, an' you've made a different galoot out o' me. An', now, in advance, I want to tell you somethin'. Keep yer eyes peeled, fer you're goin' to be menaced with trouble. I feel et in my bones, an' I'll help ye all I can, but ye wanten look sharp at every one, an' be ready to shoot, at an instant's notice."

Sierra Sam looked puzzled.

"I don't understand what peril you have reference to," he said.

"Nor will you, until a trap is sprung on you—at least, that's my opine. All I want ye to do is look out fer snakes, an' ef ye git stuck in the mud, depend on't, Jim Gouger'll help ye out, ef he can!"

The Californian was silent a moment; his brow was cloudy, and his eyes gleamed fitfully.

"See here!" he suddenly cried, seizing the Coloradoan by the shoulder, his face stern in its expression. "I want to know if you are insinuating against her," and he nodded toward the Galoot's Goal, "for if you are, I'll make you answer for it. I'll stand up for that gal, every time, no matter what any one says."

"Glory hallelujah epluribus unison!" ejaculated Gouger; "hyar, too, Sierra—hyar too, cl'ar from the soles o' my stogies ter ther balcony o' my new plug, by gum! Stack my flush in favor o' that gal, will I, every day in a week, an' teetotally chaw up an' masticate ary galoot as durst aver that she ain't ther purtiest an' worthiest piece o' caliker thet eyver graced these hyer regions. Lordy, Sam'l, I hope ye don't think I'll go back on thet ar' gal, do ye—the only gal who give me a touch o' her purty hand, these many years?"

"No! no, of course not; excuse my seeming roughness, for I was hasty. There's evidently a conspiracy working against the girl, judging from what I've heard, and if I find who is the instigator of it, I'll break his neck, as sure as my name is Sierra Sam!"

"Bully for you! I'm with you, fer every ducat I'm worth!" Gouger cried with so much emphasis, that Sam could no longer doubt the fellow's sincerity.

Then, the two men shook hands and Sam went back to his cabin.

"Been courtin', sah?" Jeff queried, with a grin, as the Californian came up to where he was pecking away in the sand and rock of the lake shore.

"On! no," the Californian replied. "I didn't even see the girl, Jeff. I believe I'll try my hand at fishing, instead of wooing."

"Stonishin' w'at an influence dis yar chile has got ober de boss," Jeff soliloquized, after Sam had entered. "He wouldn't no more think of goin' ag'in' de 'pinyun ob Jeff Davis Dump, dat Sam'l, dan a white buzzard would ob layin' red robbin's eggs. Jes' w'at dis chile advises, de boss heah done go for to do, persimmons suah—ya! ya! ya!"

Bowieville was not eminently a bonanza burg, but had several paying quartz mines, not to speak of a number of less valuable placer claims, so that, all told, she produced about as much gold as the average mining-camp of her size.

Speculators did not as a rule take kindly to the place, and therefore there was no particular "boom," and rarely any exchange of interests.

Of the miners; a goodly number of them had placer stakes, from which they eked out a fair living, while the remaining element mostly worked in the quartz drifts for so much per day.

These quartz-mines, five in number, were owned by two persons—four of them by a miserly old bachelor named Silas Stork, and the fifth, the "Little Sunshine," by Max Montague.

The man Silas Stork was an old "vet," so to speak, who had gambled and speculated in

stocks almost from infancy up to his present age of seventy, and had accumulated an immense fortune, all of which, aside from his mines, was safely invested in government bonds and other good securities.

Morose, surly and miserly old delegate that he was, he had not a friend who was a friend, in all Bowie, and the few who claimed acquaintance with him were 'sharps,' who knew him only in the hope of "fattening" from his finances.

He never risked a cent unless he saw a chance of doubling on his investment; road-agents and their like considered him no good, as no money could ever be found about his person or his shanty, where he lived in the most miserly and frugal manner, with not so much as even a dog or cat to keep him company.

On the morning after his arrival in Bowieville, Judge Berkley, of California, left the hotel, and inquiring the direction, sought out Silas Stork's humble shanty, which stood a hundred yards down the gulch, from the Galoot's Goal.

Knocking on the door, Judge Berkley awaited an answer to the summons, but none came.

Growing impatient, he rapped again—this time louder.

And got a reply.

"Who's there, and what's wanted?" a sharp, rasping voice demanded, from the inside.

"It is me—Judge Berkley, of Sacramento, California," the judge replied. "Open up, and let me in."

The two men were soon after seated face to face, within the rudely furnished shanty, with a table between them, upon which was a long-necked black bottle and glasses.

Silas Stork was tall, thin, pinched-faced and sallow, and his hair was white as driven snow. Age had bent his form, and so shattered his nerves that he trembled constantly. His eyes, however, dark and piercing, had lost none of the brightness of their youth.

"Well, old time friend, I see that the ravages of time have made an inroad upon your constitution, and you are getting well along toward the end of life's race," Berkley said. "I suppose you are prepared for the inevitable, Silas?"

"Ay, I can say I am," the old miser answered. "I have long expected the end, and tried to look forward to it with pious submission to the will of our Supreme Ruler. Bearing in mind the fact that I cannot reasonably expect to live much longer, as my health has been failing for some months past, I wrote you to pay me a visit, accompanied by your daughter; and I am glad to see you here."

"Yes, I came, not knowing how to refuse the request, when we used to be such firm friends."

"And you brought your daughter, Benjamin?"

"I did, although I was at loss to know why you should desire her to pay you a visit."

Silas Stork chuckled.

"Well, it was partly a freak of mine—you know I was always addicted to eccentricity, somewhat. And, then, I had another motive; I want to get married!"

Judge Berkley did not look surprised.

"I suspected something of the kind," he said, quietly. "I wonder you have remained so many years in a state of single blessedness. I presume you have a matrimonial eye set upon my daughter, Louise?"

"Exactly!" the miser admitted, blandly, evidently glad of the judge's ready tact in helping him out. "That's the very thing, judge—the very thing, sir. You see, matters stand this way, with me. I am the last one of my family. I have, on the whole face of the earth, no relative or near or dear friend, except you. I recently read in a California paper, that you had failed, heavily!"

"It is true—everything was apparently swept away!" the judge confessed.

"Well, be that as it may," Stark continued, "I knew that a little help from me wouldn't come amiss; so I decided that I would invite you here, and if, after seeing me, your daughter could make up her mind to marry me, I would, after the marriage, make out my will, bequeathing to her my gold mines and all my moneys, bonds and securities, thereby making her one of the richest women on the Western slope."

Judge Berkley looked complacent.

"Silas," he said, grasping the miser's hand across the table, "I can never express my true feelings in a case like this. Why, sir, I am at once astonished and delighted."

"And I meant you should be. And now, how

about your daughter? What will she say to such a thing? Woman-like, will she not, as a matter of course, refuse?"

"I hardly know how to decide," the judge answered. "Louise, whose first name, you will remember, is Lillian, is a remarkably strange and scrupulous girl. She will not, if she knows it, do anything she thinks is wrong, and I am fearful she would consider an alliance with you under the circumstances as marrying for money, which I have heard her say, often, she never would do."

"I admire her for that," the miser declared; "it shows that she is honorable. It can be arranged, however, so that she need not know anything about the fortune awaiting her."

"Oh! certainly; I think I can fix it all right. I fancy she already reverences you, just from my description of your noble traits of character, she is such an impulsive young thing. I suppose the sooner the matter is satisfactorily fixed, friend Silas, the better it will suit you."

"Exactly!" the old man assented, his pinched face glowing with pleasure. "I will have the formula of my will all arranged, awaiting the time when my bride comes to me!"

Judge Berkley soon after took leave of the miser, and in order to somewhat allay the excitement he was laboring under, walked about town to get a view of what few "sights" Bowie's youthful city had to offer.

On the street he passed Max Montague, who gave him so searching a glance that the judge was impelled to turn around and gaze back after the owner of the Little Sunshine mine.

"Hang it!" he mused, "it seems to me I've seen that fellow before. I wonder where?"

Not five minutes later he passed Sierra Sam, who was just coming into town. He had seen the judge first, and a strange expression passed over his face, leaving it perfectly calm when the judge looked at him as he passed by.

Sam gave no sign that he recognized the judge, and hurried on up the street; but not so with the judge.

He gave a violent start when he saw the sport, and once more halted and turned around, his eyes following Sierra Sam in a strange, startled glance, and his features wearing a grayish pallor.

"Can it be possible—bah! no, I surely am mistaken!" he hissed between his teeth. "The eyes are the same—that's all. This man is somewhat larger, and of altogether a different type. If, indeed, he were the one I first took him to be, I am positive he would have recognized me, for I have not changed in four years. Bah! All is well, and everything is working charmingly. Once we get possession of Stork's millions, I'll soon put out for the East, as it will not be exactly safe for me ever to go back to Sacramento, with the suspicion on me that existed when I took my midnight departure. Luck never forsakes me, or I should never have been called here to rake in the poor old fool's shekels. Marry him? Of course, Louise, with all her cunning, will marry him. She's a good girl, is Louise, and I certainly have no reason to find fault with her, except for her foolish infatuation for a young rascal who got drummed out of Stockton for swindling. Let me see. I believe they called him Guy Arrundel—dear Guy, Louise calls him. Bah! the fool!"

CHAPTER VI.

SAM AND CAPITOLA.

SIERRA SAM went back to his cabin, and busied himself in cooking dinner for himself and Jeff, the aforesaid repast consisting of corn cakes, and some of the large trout he had caught. Being a good cook, he prepared a dinner to which he and the negro did full justice.

After dinner, he fixed up a hammock out of a blanket, beneath the shade of a large tree near the cabin, and armed with a novel, prepared to spend a quiet afternoon.

A soft, pine perfumed breeze was blowing down from the mountains, which in a measure cooled the sun's scorching rays; birds were singing in the old tree, and insects droning through the air; otherwise a sense of peaceful quiet seemed brooding over all nature. It was just such a day as harmonized with the Californian's temperament—such a day as he liked to give up to idle dreams and utter laziness.

But he was not destined to have undisturbed quiet a great while as he lay basking in the shade of the great tree.

He had got as far as where the "heavy villain" of the story was about carrying off the heroine, when he heard a decidedly girlish laugh, and springing to a sitting posture in the

hammock, he saw Capitola Carson standing near at hand.

"It's just too bad!" she said, leaning upon her handsome rifle, and looking very pretty and picturesque in her male attire, with the snow-white sombrero set jauntily upon her regal head. "I was going to slyly give you a good swing, and perhaps a tumble from your improvised hammock, but I never can keep from laughing when I'm doing anything villainous!"

Sam thought just then that she looked very little capable of villainy—this beauteous girl, whose eyes were fascinating enough to drive a man into a seventh degree of ecstasy.

"I am pleased to see you," he simply said. "Judge my surprise, however, in seeing the Galoot's Goal bereft of its greatest attraction."

"Oh! I found the 'tender-feet' not so numerous this afternoon as to demand my attention to biz, and so I took leave of absence, and started out for a ramble, you see. But the sun was so hot that I changed my mind, and thought I'd run down and see if your sable companion had struck any pay-dirt."

Then, she had not come to see him! Sam, somehow, felt rather glad of this. He did not wish to get too thick with this Bowieville beauty who ran the place where men won and lost a year's living by the turning of a hand, no matter how much he might admire her.

"Well, I guess we'll not get rich off of our claim," he remarked, "but then—"

"That isn't your object in working it!" she finished, with strange little laugh. "But, as long as it disguises your real object in coming here to Bowie, it don't matter whether the claim pans out well or not."

The Californian looked surprise.

"What do you know regarding my errand, here?" he asked, leaning forward, and studying her face, eagerly.

"Nothing whatever. I was only surmising that the darky's mining here was a blind."

"Others have surmised likewise, do you think?"

"I don't know. Perhaps. Are you coming down to the Goal, to-night?"

"I don't know; I may drop in, to bet on the queen of hearts!" with a laugh.

"Do so, and you'll win, every time," she declared, with an answering smile. "The Montague evidently does not fully appreciate you, as a pool player."

"I shouldn't have played so 'stout,' had I known he was—"

"My fellow?" she interrupted, anticipating him. "Ha! ha! You're 'way off, there. Indeed, I am not fortunate enough to possess such an acquisition. Max Montague knows that he's following a wrong trail, if he lays much dependence on ever capturing me. To change the subject—do you intend to remain here long?"

"Until I make my arrangements," Sam replied.

She glided closer, then her face suddenly changed from a gay to an anxious expression.

"I want you to tell me one thing!" she said, her eyes gazing steadily into his. "I want you to tell me, and tell me truthfully—is it a man or a woman whom you seek here in Bowieville?"

It was a question plainly put, and he knew of no way of answering it otherwise than in a direct way.

He did not flinch at her searching gaze, although it would have put out many a man, so accusing it was.

He gazed at her a moment, wondering if there was another face as fair and beautiful as hers—then—

"It originally was a man!" he answered, and an irresistible impulse caused him to draw her close beside him, and imprint a kiss upon her cherry lips, "but, I'll not vouch that I may not also seek a woman, ere I get through with my experience in this place, and ask her to be my wife!"

She lay for a moment in the embrace of his strong arms, looking up into his face, the light of a passionate, undying love gleaming from her eyes, and an expression of quiet content upon her fair young face; then she suddenly released herself, as if frightened, and stepped off a few paces, her features so white that the Californian feared she was going to faint.

"Stop!" she cried, gaspingly, as he was about to leap from the hammock; "don't for your own sake, for my sake and for God's sake, don't! A barrier stands between us, which, no matter what our affection might be for one another, cannot be broken except in death. You are a man—more, a noble man; in Heaven's name let nothing of this kind again occur!"

Then she turned and hurried away, the bowl-

ders between the town and the trysting-place soon hiding her from view.

Sam watched her until she was no longer in sight; then he hastily resumed the reading of his book, as he heard approaching footsteps.

But it was no use. A genuine negro laugh apprised him that there was no use of playing innocent, and a moment later the face of Jefferson Davis Dump peered over into the hammock, a ludicrous grin distorting it.

"Kil! yah! ain't youh done gone ashamed of youhself, boss?" the darky snorted.

"No, I'm not, you rascal!" Sam cried, springing up with mock anger. "You've been playing spy, you infernal black-and-tan!"

"Yah! dat's so, boss! Dis yar chile took in de hull circus, free ob cha'ge, an' by golly I cl'ar to gracious youh done gone an' do it up in style, couldn't 'a' done bettah myself, sah! Don't blame you a bit, sah!"

And the imp of blackness sat down on the ground and roared with laughter, until the vexed son of the Sierra Nevadas had a great notion to get out of his hammock and administer to him a dose of boot-leather.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHALLENGE.

LATER that afternoon, Sierra Sam left Jeff to look after the cabin, and once more sauntered up into the mining-camp in search of the post-office, as he had a letter to mail.

Now Bowieville's postal business was not so large as to require any great amount of room for its transaction, and so, accordingly, the little case of pigeon-holes occupied one end of the little hardware store, run by one Jersey Bill, who in himself, was a pretty tough customer in a scrimmage, 'twas said.

A stage had just come in, and the mail was being distributed as the Californian entered the post-office; so he had to wait, with others, until the little wicket door was opened for delivery.

There were a score of men in the room, mostly rough-dressed and dirty, and Sierra Sam knew that he was the center for many curious glances.

Among those in the room was no less a personage than Judge Berkley, who was engaged in driving a bargain with the store-keeper for a six-shooter, all unconscious that Sierra Sam stood next but one to him.

"No, sir-ee!" the judge was saying, emphatically; "I can't pay no such price for a weapon, to-day, for I've not the means."

"Dog cheap, that ar' tool!" Jersey Bill declared, handling the handsomely plated agent of death with pride. "I tell ye ye can't git no sich a tool, in ary town along the range, fer twenty-five dollars."

"Maybe not," the judge admitted, "but you see, the fact is, I'm purty nigh broke jest now, fer a cussed gang o' road agents stopped our stage last night, and relieved me of nearly all the money I brought with me—fifty odd thousand dollars."

This was a big lie, of course, but the judge believed in telling a good story, at all hazards, as far as size was concerned.

"Sho! Are you the man?" Jersey Bill asked. "I heard the 'agents' skinned out some galoot, but didn't know who it was."

"Yas, it was me—just my infernal luck. But, then, I shall get help, soon, as my daughter is about to wed the richest man in Bowieville. Give you ten dollars for the weapon on the strength of that!"

"Guess not!" Jersey Bill responded, restoring the weapon to its place in his showcase. "Et may all be as you say, but I wouldn't give much fer any woman's chance o' marryin' old Stork."

The judge chuckled.

"See ef my gal, Louise, don't fetch him up in to matrimony!" he said, turning away, in time to see Sierra Sam just moving toward the postal window.

"Now, then, to learn who that chap is!" he muttered, and he accordingly fell into line, directly behind the sport, his hand in his pocket, as if he sought a weapon there.

"Any letters or papers here for Sam Slocum?" the Californian asked, of the postmistress, Mrs. Jersey Bill.

The woman shook her head, and Sam was about to pass on—then she called him back.

"Here's two letters for Sierra Sam—do they belong to you?"

"I reckon they do," Sam replied, and receiving them, he left the window, giving the next man a chance, who was Judge Berkley, and who received a letter, the postmark on which was Sacramento, Cal.

With an expression of anxiety upon his face, the judge stepped to the front of the store, and

tore open his letter, first taking note that Sierra Sam had already taken his departure.

The letter was penned in a rapid hand and read as follows:

"SACRAMENTO, 6-8-18—

"FRIEND B.:-

"I hasten to let you know that there is no hope for anything more to be done in this country. The county is alive with watchers, and you want to look sharp about you, even where you are, for I fancy it is known or at least suspected where you lit out for, when you left Sacramento. I succeeded in shipping the tools to—well, you know where—and have also started a package of 'tens' to you.

"Yours, LIEUT. COOK."

The judge's teeth went together, as he folded the missive, and stowed it away in an inner pocket.

"Cook is right!" he mused, leaving the store.

"Some of the sharks may drop down here, by any stage. Therefore it behooves me to bring matters to a focus as rapidly as possible, so that I can be ready to skip at a moment's notice, if necessary. After all, I am safe yet, for the long-haired fellow is not the man I took him to be. He asked for mail for Sam Slocum—which is not the name of my enemy."

Sierra Sam went immediately from the post-office to the Galoot's Goal, and took a seat where he was somewhat isolated from the few miners who were lounging about the place.

Capitola was engaged in running a game of faro at the table, where several "tender-foots" were betting quite freely on something they knew little or nothing about. She simply looked up and nodded as the Californian entered, and then turned her attention to the game.

Lighting a cigar, Sam proceeded to tear open and peruse his letters.

The first one was written in a graceful feminine hand, and was simply an interrogative, without date, and ran as follows:

"SIERRA SAM—DEAR SIR:-

"Since we have so unexpectedly crossed each other's track, what do you propose to do?"

"LOUISE BERKLEY."

A whistle of surprise escaped the sport's lips as he tore up the letter, and scattered the tiny pieces upon the floor. His handsome face wore a peculiar, thoughtful expression.

"It remains to be seen what I shall do," he muttered, a trifle savagely. "I wonder who this letter is from?"

He tore it open and perused it, surprise and anger gleaming from his eyes. It was from Max Montague, the owner of the Little Sunshine mine, and was a source of greater astonishment to the Californian, than anything that had happened since his coming into Bowie's classic city.

It read:

"SAMUEL SLOCUM, SIR:-

"This afternoon I was accidentally a witness to a scene that causes me to write you this letter, and which filled me to overflowing with righteous indignation. I refer, of course, to the hammock scene, unabbreviated, from Romeo and Juliet!!! From what I saw and heard I have come to the conclusion that you and I, as a whole, take up too much room in this town, and that it is necessary that one or the other of us should be removed. The barrier which Juliet alluded to, chances to be embodied in myself, and is insurmountable. Therefore, being too much of a gentleman to give you a thrashing or horse-whipping in public, I must give you a chance for your life. Not to give you a possible chance to back out of an encounter with me, I take pleasure in calling you a consummate puppy and a scoundrel, and in challenging you to meet me in duel, you to have the privilege of naming the time, place, and manner of the meeting.

"Yours in cordial hatred,

"MAX MONTAGUE."

Had a slide swept down from the pinnacle of the snow-capped Sierra Nevadas and engulfed him, there and then, Slocum could not have been more taken aback than he was at the reception of this challenge to mortal combat from the owner of the principal quartz mine in Bowie—the Little Sunshine.

"The infernal fool!" he muttered, gazing across the room at the fair face of Capitola Carson, but meaning, of course, Montague. "I hope he don't think he is going to get rid of a rival in doing this. I wonder what yonder fair girl is to him? There is a mystery here; she is even more a mystery in herself. In what way is the Montague a barrier? Confound him! he shall be accommodated for his insolence, if I never do another thing in my life."

One side of the sheet of paper upon which the mine-owner had written was blank, and so Sierra Sam made use of it.

"Mr. Insurmountable Barrier," he wrote, in a graceful style of chirography. "your bunch of bom-

bast just received, and in reply say that I would accept your challenge, only that I know you are not able to cope against odds as great as yours truly. Still, if you seek satisfaction, I think I can arrange it so that neither of us will have an advantage. It shall be a duel with knives, on horseback and blindfolded. Place—on the street near the Galoot's Goal. Time—moonlight to-night.

"Yours—in your mind,

"SAM SLOCUM."

"P. S.—Have you thought of any particular spot where you would like to be planted?"

A grim smile lit up the Californian's face as he read over what he had written, and folded both letters and inclosed them in the torn envelope.

"I fancy that'll make him as lively as an eel on a hot griddle!" he muttered. "Ah! here's a chance to send it to him now."

He referred to Mugg, who had just entered, and approached with alacrity as soon as he beckoned.

"I have a letter here which I want delivered to a fellow called Max Montague," Sam said, "and I want it done right away. How much do you want to do the errand for me?"

"Well, sir, my name is Mugg and I'm a lawyer, and not an errand-boy," the pettifogger replied, with great dignity. "Still, seeing it's you, I'll do the thing as an accommodation for—well, say a 'V.'"

"Not hardly!" Sam replied. "I'll give you two bits. Not a cent more, so take it or let it alone."

"Well, better earn something than nothing," and seizing the letter and money, the man of law hurried away.

"To let him carry that will insure a good attendance at the picnic to-night," Sam muttered, "for every one in Bowie will have full news of the affair before dusk."

And he was right there.

Capitola gave him an indifferent glance as he arose and left the saloon, which still further convinced him that there was something more than ordinarily strange in the power that Montague held over her, if, indeed, he did have any influence over her actions.

Back to the camp went the Californian, and prepared supper, and he and Jeff ate in almost comparative silence.

After the meal Sam made a few changes in his toilet, substituting a red shirt for the white one he had worn earlier in the day, and a gayly trimmed gold-buttoned velvet jacket for his commoner coat.

He also shaved, combed his hair with care, and waxed out his mustache to a point. Wiping up his revolvers and adding a handsome bowie-knife to his belt, he was ready for the forthcoming duel.

Jeff watched the preparations in open-mouthed amazement.

"Now see yar, boss," he finally broke out, unable to longer restrain his curiosity, "I spec's you'b no 'jections to tellin' a feller w'at you'se gwine to do, hab youh?"

"None in the least," Sam replied, dryly, as he surveyed himself in a pocket-mirror. "I suppose I am rather a puzzle to you. Well, I'm going up into town to kill a man as soon as the moon comes up. How does my appearance hit you—do I look presentably ferocious?"

Jeff put up his hands in genuine horror.

"Say, boss, youh don't mean it, do youh, fo' suah? You'se jes' foolin'," he gasped. "If you kills anybody, boss, by golly you nebber get a pass into de new Jerusalem, certin suah."

"Well, I ain't positive I shall anyhow," the Californian replied, a different expression coming over his face. "I'm not going to commit murder, Jeff. I've been challenged to fight a duel, all on account of the kissing scrape, and probably some one will either get badly hurt or killed, with the chances largely in my favor. If I get laid out, Jeff, you know where my money is; take it and make the best of it, and when you harness on to another pard, try and select a better chap than Sierra Sam."

Then, with a reckless laugh, this young man of men turned and strode away toward the mining-camp; nothing of hesitation or fear was there in his deportment as he sallied forth to meet in mortal combat the owner of the Little Sunshine mine.

A Chinese Jew is a luxury that not many a mining town can boast—that is to say, a Chinaman with the characteristic shrewdness and business turn of a typical Jew—yet Bowieville boasted of one of these luxuries.

Hong-Kong John kept a little den not far from the post-office, where he loaned money on valuables and bought and sold second-hand things, that yielded in return a goodly profit. John also did the banking business of

the place, and was trusted by every one, as none had ever discovered any dishonest tricks about him.

John had made his "pile" in the "washee" business during Deadwood's prime, and was considered as well "heeled" as any man in Bowie except old Silas Stork.

Having a large bill he wanted to get changed, Sam made his way to the Celestial's place and entered at a door which opened into a small store, where business was transacted.

A partition some six or seven feet high separated the store from a second apartment, but as the partition did not reach to the ceiling a word spoken loudly in the rear room was also audible in the store.

At the time of Sam's entrance there was no one behind the counter, but loud voices were conversing in the next room.

"There, sir!" he heard a woman's voice cry, "is the money. Take it, unfeeling man! And now, will you let me see the child?"

"Belly muchee sorry, but I can't," the bland voice of the Chinaman answered. "Melican lady pay backee thousan' dollee—Chinaman givee backee child."

"I do not ask you to give me the child until I have fully squared up every cent of my indebtedness to you!" the woman cried, sharply. "Already I have paid back four thousand of the five I borrowed from you, and I fancy it will not take me much longer to earn the rest. I simply want to see the poor little thing to satisfy myself that she is well."

"She nottee be seen!" Hong-Kong John answered. "She still safe an' well, allee samee like before, up in mountee!"

There was an exasperated cry on the part of the woman.

"Oh! you monster!" she gasped; "would to God I had a thousand dollars to free that poor, innocent child of mortgage from your merciless custody!"

Then a door in the partition opened, and a woman passed hurriedly out of the store into the street.

Sierra Sam scrutinized her closely as she passed out, for pity was awakened in his breast for her.

She was clad in a ragged dress, with a heavy cloak thrown around her shoulders; wore a hood and a thick impenetrable veil tied closely down over her face. She was of good form, and walked with an agile, elastic step.

Sam's curiosity impelled him to step to the door and gaze after her, and he saw that she went up the gulch in the direction of the lake.

After she was gone from view he turned to Hong-Kong John, whose almond eyes and flat visage were now to be seen behind the counter.

"You have a child belonging to that woman, which you refuse to give up to her custody until she pays you a thousand dollars?" Sam said, interrogatively.

John nodded, but did not speak.

"Well, I want to buy that child's liberty!" the Californian announced. "So send for the child, and a thousand dollars shall be yours."

"Can'tee do it," the Celestial replied, with a grin. "Don't wantee Melican man's money."

Then, without waiting to say more, the son of Confucius whipped a cocked revolver from under the counter, leveled it at Sam, and pointed to the door.

"Melican git—one! two! three!—or Chinaman shootee, allee samee, belly quick!"

"Well, blast my picture if you ain't decidedly pat!" Sam cried, backing out for fear the heathen really did mean shoot. "I guess I won't stop to argue with you this eve; some other eve will do as well."

Once outside, he felt decidedly chagrined and simple.

"The infernal pig-tail ain't caught napping, that's sure," he muttered. "Here is another mystery for a fellow to puzzle his head over. I guess I'll have to get Gouger onto that 'washee,' and let him make a meal of him."

The moon peeping over the horizon and smiling down into the gulch, just then, reminded him that the time was approaching for the forthcoming duel, so he sauntered up to the vicinity of the Galoot's Goal.

Here a crowd had collected, which embraced the major part of Bowie's population—men, women and children; and there was a shout of applause as Sierra Sam marched up.

"Thanks, fellow-citizens," he said, pausing and doffing his hat, "but will some one enlighten me as to the cause of this hyar mass-meeting?"

"Kerwhoop! great cavortin' Feejeers o' Frogville!" shouted Gouger, prancing forward.

"I reckon you orter kno', Sam'l, boyee, when you're one o' ther candidatorial galoots w'et's runnin' fer election, this trip. Sammy, you're a jewel you aire, right frum ther blazin' coronet uv Jupiter; you're game, sir, frum eye ter yer index toe, Sam'l, an' I can lick the lummix w'ot durst express one single opine that ye hain't got sand enough ter ballast six million balloons!"

"Oh! I see—this crowd is here in anticipation of seeing a little deefikilty, eh?" Sam observed. "If I catch that nasty little monkey-face! Mugg, I'll break his head for making such a splurge over nothing. By the way, has any one been around looking after a fellow of my size?"

"Nary a man! Durn my mule's big ears ef you ain't the least wanted man in this hyer hull town. Stack my chips on you, every time, will I, thet ye'll whallop seven kinds o' idears out o' thet pesky owner o' the Sunshine mine, afore he realizes thet you're a pecket edition o' the millenium!"

"Presumedly you would feel glad, should I succeed in overpowering my adversary," Sam said, dryly, "as 'tis remarked that misery likes company!"

The crowd laughed at this, and Gouger grinned, hugely.

"Wouldn't I laff, tho'?" he chuckled, executing a grotesque caper. "Why, I'd jest bu'st my Sunday-go-to-meetin' suspenders a-laughin', I would, ter see some other galoot git licked. I'll even squander a superfluous V, right hyer, if ary galoot will pitch in ter ye, an' let ye mop up this hyer thurrerfare wi' his anatomy."

But, liberal though the offer, there were none of the Bowievillians who cared to measure strength with the cool and handsome son of the Sierra Nevadas, who had so easily vanquished the famous King o' Kolorado.

Max Montague was soon forthcoming. He rode up, mounted upon a fiery, vicious looking gray horse, and was attired something after the style of a jockey of an Eastern race-course.

There was a sullen, ugly frown upon his face, and his eyes emitted an expression of rancorous resolve.

"Well, sir, where's your horse?" he demanded, glaring at Sierra Sam, savagely.

"Not being the owner of a gold mine, I don't happen to be possessed of such an acquisition," Sam retorted, "and I preferred not to waste money in hiring one, until I saw for certain that you came to time. Perhaps I can now hire or purchase one!"

And he looked inquiringly around at the spectators.

"Great fumigated Feejee Cannibals!" cried Jake Gouger. "I've jest the beauty fer ye—the larnedest four-futtet anymile thet ever chawed grass. Jest wait til ye see my Greased Lightnin', tho', an' then tork!"

Drawing a tin whistle from his pocket, the giant blew a shrill blast upon it and a few moments later a powerful black horse came galloping down the street, and paused beside its burly owner.

If Montague's horse had a vicious look, it was mild in appearance as compared with Gouger's equine, in whose face was an uglier look, and whose eyes gleamed with a decidedly wolfish expression.

"That's Greased Lightnin', that is!" Gouger explained, turning to Sam. "Greased, this is Sam Sierra, right down from Sierraville. I want you two galoots ter shake hands and know each other!"

The sagacious animal raised up one fore-foot as a dog might have done, and the Californian shook it, after which he patted the horse upon the neck and nose.

"That anymile knows his biz," Gouger allowed, proudly. "Greased, this hyar feller licked thunder out of me, and he's going to lick the feller on t'other horse, an' you're to put in yer best licks to help him."

To the surprise and amusement of the crowd, Greased Lightnin' laid back his ears, showed a terrible mouthful of teeth, and squealed viciously at the other horse, and the squeal was returned with interest.

The two animals were as great enemies, evidently, as the two duelists.

"Come! come!" Montague cried, impatiently, "are you going to be all night getting ready? I'm anxious to get down to business!"

"Ditto Sam'l!" the Californian retorted. "Jest climb off your horse, and let some one blindfold your eyes and bind one arm behind your back—then we'll mount, ride off seventy yards from a given spot, turn around, and come for each other—and the devil help the unlucky man!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DUEL.

THE stern ring to the Californian's voice spoke better than his words that he was as eager to have the matter settled as was his opponent.

Montague promptly dismounted and signaled one of the miners, who came forward with a handkerchief and a piece of cord.

"This binding and blindfolding business must be done square!" he said, turning to the crowd. "Gentlemen, I'll trust to you to see that everything is 'white.'"

A murmur from the crowd signified that they would see the fair thing done, and revolvers were characteristically drawn on every hand.

"Yas, ye bet yer grandfather's septuagenarian socks everything will be s clean an' square as ther block o' Plymouth granite on which old Christy Columbjy fust landed!" Jake Gouger declared, acting as second for Sierra, and binding his left arm behind his back, and blindfolding his eyes. "But et ain't no use, Montague; et won't down no more than the ghost o' Job's superannuated turkey at the raffle. Et's a fore-sworn and positive fact that ye've slung your slack ag'in' the wrong man this time, an' aire goin' to git ther orfullest humiliatin' lickin' ye ever hearn tell on. Why, man alive, I, Gouger, the famous roarin' Cannerbal o' the Nor'-west, jest sailed down hyar last evenin', b'ilin' for a fight, thinkin' o' nothin' else but cleanin' out the burg in two jerks of a lamb's tail, when what did this hyar 'arthquake do but knock me flatter then a pigtail's face; an' then, arter I riz in all my majesty, to stamp him out of existence as I would a blowin' fly, what did thet durned galoot do but coolly pick me up and dump me inter a tar barrel? Oh! Lordy fish-hooks—I never war so humiliated an' broke up in my life!"

The crowd cheered at this, for they were beginning to like this man-rough, about whom there was enough manhood at least to good-naturedly acknowledge his defeat.

"The Slocum will not find so easy a chap to handle this time," Montague observed, with a mocking laugh.

"Durn my boots ef I don't bet you'll get licked!" Gouger protested. "An' ef you don't, hyar's what'll try you a whack arterwards. Thar, Sammy, ye're all right. Now jest straddle Greased Lightning, an' when he lights out ye want ter hang on ter yer head, fer I've had the wind tear my scalp off a dozen times, the anamile went so fast."

Sierra Sam leaped lightly astride the big black, at the same moment that Montague mounted the gray, and all was ready, except fixing out the dueling course.

Gouger and a miner named Haverly attended to this, each starting from the middle of the stage track in front of the Galoot's Goal and pacing off a distance of seventy yards in opposite directions, at the limit of which stakes were driven in the road, to mark the starting-point.

The horses were then led forward to each goal and faced about.

"Now, then, gents, git ready!" Gouger sung out, whereat both men drew their knives. "When I an' t'other second counts 'one, two, three,' in quick chorus, let fly at each other. Great toothsome Feejees! I wish we had a brass band hyar to open up this circus!"

"Hold on—let up!" Jeremiah Mugg cried, darting through the crowd. "Here is an important letter for Sierra Sam, an' the one as sent it said as how it ust be delivered at once."

"Who sent it?" Gouger demanded, advancing to receive it.

"None o' your business, Shorty!" Mugg cried, darting past the giant and handing the letter to the Californian.

"Durn ye, wait 'til I git ther 'sponsibility o' this funeral off'n my flukes, an' I'll be cannerbalized ef I don't fling ye way over the moon, ye little banty-legged bone-yard!" the King o' Kolorado fumed, fiercely.

"Ba-a!" retorted Mugg, feeling highly elated at his success in getting ahead of the bruiser. "You have yer hands full ter keep yer distance from tar-bar'ls!"

Being blindfolded, Sierra Sam could not read the letter; so after Mugg had retreated he handed it to the giant.

"Read it to me, Jake," he said, "but be careful not to let the others hear you."

"Thar ain't much on it," Gouger said, after tearing off the wrapper. "Here's all: 'Mr. Slocum: For my sake, do not harm Mr. Montague, if you can help it. C. C.' Thet's all."

"Humph!" Sam said, a strange expression gathering about his lips.

"Mugg! who sent that note?" Montague shouted from his end of the course.

"You orter be able to guess!" the lawyer retorted, significantly, whereat the mine-owner uttered a vindictive oath.

"Come, gents—all ready!" yelled Gouger. "Now, Haverly—one! two! three!"

Quick, indeed, was the count, but no quicker than was the shout "Get!" given by the riders to the animals they bestrode, nor the rapidity with which the animals responded to the order by leaping forward.

It was an imposing spectacle, never before or afterward granted the rough assemblage of Bowievillians, and they stood with bated breath, and gazed with eager, startled interest.

In the doorway of the Galoot's Goal stood Capitola Carson, her face as white as marble, and an expression of horror and alarm burning in her wild eyes, as she leaned against the door-post with clasped hands for support.

In an upper opened window of the Bowie Hotel sat Louise Berkley, a frightened look also upon her face.

Down into the one main street of the mining-camp poured a flood of brilliant moonlight, making everything startlingly distinct.

And through this mellow scene now dashed two maddened horses, bearing to mortal combat two blinded men, as unlike as were the powerful, flying steeds they bestrode.

Each horse seemed to enter fully into the vengeful spirit of the occasion, for they advanced with vicious mien, their ears laid back, their mouths half-opened, and eyes glaring furiously.

Each man bent forward, grasping firmly a large, keen-edged bowie, with which to kill the other, if in his power to strike the death-blow.

Forward! forward they dashed, until the animals were not a yard apart, when both reared upon their hind feet with screams of fury. For an instant they stood thus, poised in mid-air—then, there was a crash forward, each animal seeming intent upon crushing the other to the ground.

And as the collision came, the two duelists reached blindly forward and each struck two rapid blows.

Then, there came two rapid responses—one from brute, one from man, in the way of painful screeches, and down, to the earth, the vicious gray went, pinioning its rider, from whose bared right arm spurted a jet of blood.

A huzza of yells arose from the rough audience.

It was a quicker termination than they had looked for, and Sierra Sam had done it fairly.

Only two lightning blows had he struck, but they were of telling effect—one had pierced the arm of Max Montague, and the second one had driven the stout blade of the bowie down into the brain of the gray horse, through the top of the skull, causing almost instant death.

Unable to move was the mine-owner, as he lay upon the ground, face upward, the body of the horse resting upon his legs and stomach.

Flinging away his knife, Sierra Sam tore the bandage from his eyes, and leaped to the ground, even as the crowd of spectators surged forward.

Montague heard him, and gasped in terror, believing that the victorious Californian was about to finish him.

"Mercy! mercy!" he articulated, faintly. "I beg!"

"Oh! you do?" Sam said, coolly. "Well, that is quite unnecessary, as I never kick a man when he's down. Gents!"—turning to the crowd, "you will probably be willing to assist in taking a load from this individual's stomach, if not from his mind."

The horse was pried up, so that Montague could extricate himself, and when he had gained his feet, the bandage was taken from his eyes.

His face was white with commingled anger and affright—his eyes gleamed, redly.

"Kerwhoop! who sez the great Cannerbal o' the Nor'-west ain't a prognosticator o' cmin' events!" the giant roared, pointing at the mine-owner. "Didn't I tell ye, Monty—thar ain't no more use o' buckin' ag'in' Serious, hyer, than thar is a fulein' wi' ther bizness end of a was-sup. He's bound ter play ther winnin' trick, every time, in ther interest o' doctors an' hearse-proprietors."

"Accidents will occur!" Montague replied, with a forced calmness that was wonderful, considering his anger. "Haverly, will you bind up my arm?"

"Am I to understand you propose to finish this matter? If so, there's no time like the pre-

sent, after you get your wind!" Sam suggested.

"No, thank you!" Montague replied. "I have had a sufficiency, for the present. When my arm gets well, I will try you another whack!"

"Durn my ducats but you've got sand, anyhow!" Gouger cried, enthused. "But take my Scripser's advice, an' leave town, while yer anatomy is in good pedal condition, fer ef ye ever tackle a pandemonious cuss o' Sam's size ag'in, thar won't be enuff o' yer carcass left ter grease the j'int o' a fust-class pankake-griddle with. An' you hark to the tuneful voice o' old Jake Gouger. Ef it hadn't bin fer thet William-Due wot Sierra received frum ther gal Capitola, you'd now be travelin' up Jordan's rugged trail, ere this!"

Then, turning, majestically, the giant followed the Californian toward the Galoot's Goal.

The duel was over; the crowd gave a parting cheer, and pulled out for their various destinations, most of the masculine element however, making for the various saloons, for liquor.

For the next several days, there was no particular occurrence in Bowie's little mining-camp worthy of mention. Sam spent most of his time at the cabin, engaged in writing, for be it known, the dashing and invincible Californian had quite a little taste for literature, which he was wont to express into Sunday sketches, whenever he had nothing else more important to occupy his time.

He only went up into the town, when the stage came in, to inquire for mail, and at such times, invariably returned, almost immediately, to his cabin; therefore, he had not seen Capitola, to speak to her, since before the duel.

Jefferson Davis Dump still pecked away laboriously, day by day, on the lake-shore.

That he was unsuccessful in finding gold was a certainty which the Bowie-ites were cognizant of, and there was more than a little wonderment as to why the Californian should thus persist in keeping the darky at work, when it was an established fact in the minds of the people, that Sierra Sam had never come to Bowie to get rich, at mining.

What he had come for was just what these people did not know—nor were they liable to know by waiting for Sam to grant them the information.

Some suspicious ones, however, had whispered about that the Californian's presence in the town was not for any good to the citizens; but he paid no particular attention to them and seemed to be disposed to mind his own business, until—

One evening about a week after his duel with Montague, he had a chance to give another exhibition of his peculiar type of bravery.

It was somewhat later than usual, in the evening, when he started for the post-office.

All day long he had been scribbling away at the cabin, and the fresh evening breeze that blew down the gulch was most agreeably refreshing, as it fanned his heated brow.

The stage had arrived fully an hour before, and rather expecting a letter, he went directly to the post-office.

When arrived there, he saw an unusual amount of excitement apparent, about town, and men were grouped around, in knots, engaged in discussing some topic that seemed to call for much profanity.

As none of the men spoke or nodded to him, Sierra Sam passed into the office, and received a letter.

Just as he was about to leave, Capitola Carson entered, and glided up to him.

"Good-evening, Mr. Slocum!" she said, speaking rapidly. "Have you heard the news? and more—are you armed?"

"I never go without arms!" Sam replied, dryly, exhibiting his strong manly appendages with their white fists, in which lay so much hidden power. "What is the news, may I ask?"

"Bad news for you. I fear you'll get into trouble, if you try to leave this room, by the front way."

Sam looked his surprise.

"Why—what's the matter now?" he demanded.

"Matter enough. This morning's stage, going out, was stopped by the road-agents headed by the so-styled Lady Lil, and everything of value secured, even to a large quantity of bullion in the treasure-box. To-night, the same gang stopped Dutch Pete's stage, coming in, and cleaned out the passengers, again!"

"Well, what has this got to do with me?" Sam asked, coolly.

"Alas! they've hatched up an idea that threatens to make you trouble. It is known you are here for some purpose or other, which you do not care to divulge, and that your 'blind' game of mining is only to keep suspicion off. Therefore, they've put this and that together, and made up their minds, that you are Lady Lil, the road-agent, and, even if not her, in person, are some way connected with her; and so, when you leave the post-office, to-night, they are going to arrest you."

"Oh! they are, are they?" Sam said, with a scornful laugh. "Humph! I am not so certain about that, myself!"

CHAPTER IX.

STRIKING IN SELF-DEFENSE.

CAPITOLA looked astonished.

Brave man though Sierra Sam was, she knew that he little comprehended the magnitude of the danger that threatened, so reckless was he by force of habit.

"But, you do not understand!" she persisted, anxiously. "If you go out there, your capture is imminent; the odds are too great even for you to contend with. If captured, your fate will soon be death, for it don't take a great while to try a case, in the mines."

"So I am aware. But, if they will give me a chance to prove what I am here for, I guess I can satisfy 'em I'm not Lady Lil, or any other road-agent."

"I am afraid they will not even give you that chance!" Cap said. "They're as hot about the matter as a nest of hornets."

"Your opinion is, then, that I'd better slide out the back way, and make a break for it, eh?"

"Just what I'd advise you to do, as a friend, Mr. Slocum."

"You think with them, then, that I am the person who is playing up Lady Lil, the road-agent?"

"No—far from it. In fact, I could almost swear you are not, as at times when Lady Lil has been seen, you were here, in the gulch. But my opinion doesn't amount to anything, with these roughs. They look upon me as a shrewd gambler, who stands ready to rob them at the turning of a card, and—well, I suppose they are pretty near right, though I never take a dishonest advantage of any one."

"I'll guarantee for that. As to your advice, it is probably for the best. If I sail out into that crowd, like as not I shall either fix up a job for an undertaker—either for them or myself. I am not fond of bloodshed, by any means, but I never give up without a struggle for it. Only one thing could ever make me sneak out of this place like a coward, instead of going out and meeting these men who want to see me."

"And what is that, may I ask?"

"Shall I tell you? I will, for I may never have another chance. I love you, Capitola—have worshiped you from the hour I first saw you, and before other life experiences dawn, mayhap to divide our paths, I want to ask you to be mine. Do not say nay! No matter what seeming barriers arise to prevent you, I can overcome them all—all, if you will forever leave this place with me, and become my own faithful, true and loving wife!"

He spoke rapidly, earnestly, fervently. There could be no mistake that he was speaking the truth of the passion of his strong manly heart.

They were standing near the front of the store, with no one near to overhear what was said, for they were the only occupants of the apartment, except Jersey Bill and his wife, both of whom were attending to the post-office.

Capitola Carson listened to the declaration of the handsome knight of the Sierras with downcast eyes and flushed cheeks, while her bosom rose and fell quickly, showing that she was deeply moved at his words.

When he paused, she put her fair jeweled hand into his, her gaze still averted, and a tremor agitating her figure.

"I am very, very glad to learn that there is one person in this cold, selfish world who really cares for me, Mr. Slocum," she said, in a low, thrilling voice; "it is something I have not known of late years. I would be only too glad to surrender my whole future to your keeping, for I could do so in the full knowledge that I was giving myself into the care and guidance of a strong and honorable gentleman—one of nature's noblemen. But alas! I cannot at present so give myself away."

"Tell me why—there must be a reason?"

"There is one, but it is nothing that you can ever remedy. A day may bring forth a change, or it may take until our hairs turn gray with age. Until that change takes place, Mr. Slocum, I can never be more to you than I am now—simple Capitola Carson."

"God bless you for your frankness! I shall live for you, and yet win you, my peerless. Tell me one thing—you can afford to do that, at least, as it cannot change my regard for you. Are you in any way bound to Max Montague?—or have you ever been married?"

A crimson flush stole over her face.

"I imagined you suspected something of the kind," she answered, "and am glad you have asked me, for I can truthfully say no to both of your questions. Max Montague is no more to me than the bitterest enemy I have on earth, but I am so obligated to him that I must at least treat him civilly for a time. Some day I shall square up with him—then the barrier is broken—between us. Good-by, Mr. Slocum! I must leave you, with a prayer that you may safely get out of the trouble so darkly overhanging your head, and I wish it were in my power to help you."

She released her hand then, and was gone.

As soon as she had disappeared, Sierra Sam summoned the store-keeper to the counter.

"I want to purchase another pair of serviceable revolvers," he said, throwing down a hundred-dollar bill, "and a couple of boxes of cartridges. Make the change out of that."

"Sorry I can't accommodate ye, pard, because I ain't got nothin' against you," Jersey Bill answered; "but I can't sell ye no weepens, now."

"You've been ordered not to, eh?" the Californian demanded, his features growing stern in expression.

"Jest the ticket, perzactly," Jersey Bill admitted, with a nod, "an' as the majority is ag'in' me, I can't buck ag'in' orders, ye perceive."

"You are perfectly right," Sam replied. "I see that the citizens have got their hatched-up scheme against me laid out with a view to winning, but they shall find that it takes two to come to terms."

He examined the two revolvers in his belt to see that they were in working order; then, lighting a cigar, he strode out of the saloon, pausing just outside the door.

The scene presented to his gaze was not exactly what could be called entertaining. The entire male population of the town, from youngest to oldest, were congregated in front of the post-office, but a few paces away from where Sierra Sam had halted, and there was a general murmur as the son of the Sierras made his appearance.

For a moment, then, all was silence until Sam spoke—a grim kind of silence, in which there was sullen danger.

"Gentlemen!" he said, in his clear, ringing voice, "I understand you have assembled for the purpose of taking me a prisoner. Is it so?"

"Yas, we opine that's about the size of it!" the miner Haverly returned, acting as spokesman for the crowd.

"Well, sir, what am I to understand is the cause of this proposed arrest?"

"Cause enuff, 'squire!" the miner growled, exchanging glances. "We've come to ther conclusion that we don't want any road-agents a-hangin' around this hyar burg. You've played yer Lady Lil game mighty fine, we allow, but ye've got ter let up, now. You're jest goin' ter git tried in the romantic moonlight hyer, ter-night, an' afore yonder scoloped face o' old Luna gits out o' sight, ye're bound to be crossin' Jordan's bufler-wallow, en route fer ther happy land o' Canaan."

"Then I am to have my trial before you get me, I take it," Sierra Sam retorted, with a sneer. "You must always remember you have to catch a trout before you can eat it, which applies to myself. You had better try me, before you get me, so that if I happen to give you the slip, the next time we meet, you needn't stop to try me."

"We don't intend you'll give us ther slip!" Haverly cried. "We've got ye right whar we want ye, an' ye could not escape capture if you were ever so cute."

"Humph! I ain't a bit afraid about that!" Sierra Sam averred. "If it comes right down to business, you'll find me the toughest rabbit you ever attempted to catch, I reckon, and your local undertaker will have more cadavers to plant than he can take care of in a week. You know how I fight in ordinary ways, but when you see me shoot you'll not care to tackle me."

"Can't help that, Mr. Sam. We've sworn ter take ye alive, try ye an' hang ye, as an example for other road-agents to profit by, an' I opine we allus play up Geo. Washington and never tell a lie. So the sooner you surrender, the less apt you'll be of gittin' roughly handled."

"I'll not surrender. I am not Lady Lil the road-agent, and I can prove it!" Sam cried.

"Ye can't lie to us. We've got plenty o' proof that ye aire ther cussed plumb-center o' the gang what's bin robbin' the stages, o' late. So jest throw down your weapons, an' surrender."

"I emphatically refuse!" Sam declared. "If you desire to send a couple of men forward, as referees, I will show them papers that will clear me of the charge you prefer against me, providing they agree not to divulge the secret I confide to them, until I am ready to have them do so. Otherwise, you will lose some of your citizens ere you succeed in taking Sierra Sam, and you can bet big on that."

Haverly turned to the crowd.

"Boyees, ye hear what the cuss sez;—now, then, shall we come to his terms?"

"No!" came a stentorian shout. It sounded throughout the long line of the crowd.

"Good! He must come to ours then, or we'll know why! At him, boys. Take him alive, by all means!"

There was a resolute yell, and the populace made a fierce rush toward the veranda of the store, where the Californian was standing.

Quickly drawing his revolvers, Sam opened fire upon the gang, as they leaped forward.

Twelve shots he fired in as many seconds; then he grasped a heavy iron shutter bar which stood near at hand, and swung it about his head with a victorious yell.

"Come on, you devils!" he cried, fiercely; walk right up to the captain's office if you want to get paid off by the chunk! I'll fertilize this gulch with enough brains to start an agricultural college before you'll ever take Sierra Sam for a stage-robber, you bet your ducats!"

But mad with a desire to catch this man who defied them, the men of Bowie rushed on, only to fall back with the blows dealt by the unyielding Hercules, who swung the bar of iron with such terrible effect.

Men went crashing to the ground bleeding and terribly injured, and still the one-sided conflict waged, until at least a full score had fallen, some of them never to rise again in life, and others injured in a way that promised to lay them up for months, if not for all their lives.

Then there was a lull.

The unvictorious and unhurt remnant of the party paused to glare in horror and wonder at their loss and at the man who had caused it.

No such a record for one man in single-handed contest had ever been heard of in Bowieville even by the oldest "vets," many of whom were of the famous fighting stock of the Indian wars of years before.

"Well," Sam demanded, grimly, standing with his bar ready for a continuance of the deadly work, "have you got enough, gentlemen? I am sorry to note the havoc I have wrought, but business is business, you know, and I gave every man fair warning."

"Yes, you did," one miner allowed, "an' we were fools we didn't give ye a show fer yer money, in lettin' ye clear yerself, if ye could. I, fer one, hev got enough. The rest kin do as they please."

A consultation was held among the miners in an undertone, after which one of their number said:

"I reckon, Cap, that we won't trouble ye no more till we get this batch o' pards fixed up. Then ef you're still hangin' around town, we'll kill ye at sight."

"Very well. As I do not intend leaving the town till I get ready, you will probably be able to find me at my cabin whenever you seek gore again."

Then the man walked straight toward the crowd, still retaining the shutter bar, and the crowd parted to allow him to pass up the gulch, without offering him molestation.

Sam had half expected they would renew the attack as soon as his back was turned, but was happily disappointed, and reached the cabin without further incident, but by no means in the best of humor. The terrible work had not just been the thing to make him feel in a pleasant mood.

When he arrived at the door of the cabin a sight met his gaze that caused him to pause in astonishment.

Seated upon the door-sill was Jefferson Davis Dump, armed with a miserable apology of a

banjo, which he had picked up somewhere about the town, and which he was now playing in a vigorous and masterly style, for the edification of a second party.

And this second party was what brought to Sierra Sam the surprise which caused him to halt a few paces off.

No big burly miner, nor even a colored belle was it that Jeff was amusing, but a little four-year-old child, and a girl, at that—a sweet-featured, sunny-haired little thing with blue eyes and evidently in the best of health.

She was clad in blue jean, with red stockings, little shoes upon her feet, and a hat of the daintiest sombrero pattern on her head.

She was so taken up with the darky's playing, that Sierra Sam stood and watched her several minutes before he could find it in his power to step forward and interrupt the pleasures of the occasion.

"Hello, Jeff! Where did you pick up this little midget?" he said, stepping forward. "What's your name, little one?"

The child looked alarmed, and turned and ran over to Jeff.

"Golly, boss, I tell youh it 'tain't no use o' your tryin'; a little kid 'll allus make friends wi' de cullud race. Dis yar chile came wanderin' along here to-night, lost, I spec's, an' I jest coaxed her to stay with me."

"Perfectly right, Jeff. And now, little stranger, won't you tell me your name?" Sam asked, holding out his hands.

"Cherrie Carson, please, sir," the little fairy answered.

CHAPTER X.

MARRIED AT MIDNIGHT.

HAD a meteor descended, and burst at the feet of Sierra Sam, he could not have been more astonished.

"Cherrie Carson!" he ejaculated—"Cherrie Carson did you say?"

"Yes, sir, please," the child answered, plainly alarmed at the Californian's eager, excited manner.

"Yas, boss, you heah what she says, fo' suah, an' dar's no way fo' youh but look an unpleasant fac' squar' in de pysiognominy. I tole youh jes' de s'picious sentiments ob dis yar chile, but youh done gone wouldn't hear a word to it, an' now youh see fo' yourself dat de nigger ain't so bad a prognosticator, after all de fuss."

Sierra Sam frowned.

"I know what you would insinuate—that I've been badly taken in, on one I deemed pure as the angels; but by Heaven I will not listen to such a thing, until it is proven to me beyond doubt. This similarity of names may be only a matter of chance, without the child being anything to her,"—with a nod toward the town—"or at the worst, not of her own flesh and blood."

"Bettah question de gal, an' git at de fac's ob de case, while you're at it an' got youh foot in it," Jeff advised. "Dar's nuffin' like bakin' de hoe-cake when de griddle is hot, youh know."

"No!" Sam said, sharply. "I will not seek to pry into this child's nativity—nor, will you. Let all curiosity drop here, for time will develop all that now seems doubtful of its own accord. Keep the child here, the same as if it was my own, or at least until she calls for it, if it belongs to her."

Then the Californian entered the cabin, and was seen no more that night.

As soon as she manifested a desire to go to sleep, Jeff took the child in his arms and walked about, and sung some of his pretty southern ballads, until at last the little innocent was in dream-land.

Then he took her into the cabin, and laid her upon his own simple bed of wild grass, leaves and pine boughs, while the hard floor, close at hand, offered him a resting-place.

"By golly, dis yar is a queer world, fo' suah!" the darky mused, as he lay looking out of the open door, thoughtfully. "If dat pickaninny b'longs to dat gal Capitola, you'll jes' see de boss done go right off into a fit ob menlancholic, an' he'll never be himself ag'in, fo' suah! By gum, dese wimmen hab been a powerful sight ob trouble ebber since old mudder Eve bit a chunk from dat pippin apple, w'at we read about in de Garden ob Eden."

And it was while such a train of thoughts was running through his mind that he chanced to gaze out upon the lake, the silent, unruffled surface of which was illuminated by the moonlight.

A sight met the negro's gaze that caused him to sit up and rub his eyes, to make sure that he saw aright.

From the further wooded shore a small skiff-

boat was coming out upon the lake, and in it were three persons—two men and one lady.

One of the men used the oars, while the other sat beside the woman, evidently engaged in earnest conversation.

"Rising from his hard bed, Jeff glanced at the face of the big silver watch which he carried, and perceived that it was a few minutes after twelve o'clock.

"Well, by golly!" he muttered, stepping outside the cabin and creeping cautiously down to the edge of the lake; "ef dis yar ain't de essence of romanticness, dis yar child don't 'no' anythin' about it. S'pect 'twere at sich hours dat Romeo an' Julyer used to paddle deir own canoe. Bress youh, I'd jes' like to know ef dem couple is out spoonin', or uff dar is odder bizness in de process of incubation. S'pects Marse Sam would like to take in dis yar circus, but he hain't de side-show ob a chance, fo' I won't wake him up, nohow. I'se jes' gwine to see w'at's to be seen, myself, an' den I'll be a peg wiser dan de boss."

The boat was rowed on and outward into the lake until it reached a point near the center, when the rowing ceased and the boat came to a standstill.

"By hokey, I hope to Sam Johnsing, ef dem pussons don't contemplate goin' in a swimmin', or committin' susanside, I dunno which," Jeff soliloquized, as he crouched partly behind the boulder and watched. "Or else dar's goin' to be a prize-fight, or sum big sort of tragification."

As soon as the boat had come to a literal halt the three persons rose to a standing position, the man and woman clasping hands, and the other man facing them with an opened book in his hand.

"Jerusalaam Johnsing!" the darky gasped, matters beginning to dawn upon him in their true light. "Dar's goin' to be a splice right dar on de lake, fo' suah! Two mortals aire gwine to be kerfoolished in de bonds ob padlock. I wonder who day be, I do, fo' true. Hi! golly. Maybe de gal is Miss Capitola a-gittin' hitched to some other fellow! S'pects de boss would tear de wool all out ob his head if he know'd dat."

Whether the prospective bride was Capitola Carson or not, the darky could not tell, for he was at a considerable distance from the strange bridal scene, and, besides, the woman was wrapped in a cloak, and wore a veil over her face.

The man who was evidently going to take her as his wife, however, was more recognizable, from the fact that he wore one arm in a sling.

That he was none other than Max Montague, Jeff was pretty certain, and it also struck him forcibly that the individual with the book was Jeremiah Mugg.

"I'll jes' bet de top ob my cocoanut dat dat's jest w'at's de hull upshot ob de matter!" Jeff grunted. "De gal, Capitola, is gwine to make sure ob de mine-owner, fust, on de sly; den, if she can softsoap de boss, an' git him to make her presents ob diamens, juley, an' ebberythin', she'll rake 'em all in, an' laff up her sleeve, till he fails to pan out any longer—den she whisper softly unto de boss's tympanum—'one, two, three, skip!' Hi! hi! de sinful pursuasion ob dese yar gentler sex hab no parallel, fo' suah."

The marriage was evidently taking place, for the three persons still retained their standing position.

Jeff watched eagerly, but saw nothing of further particular moment except at the conclusion of the apparent ceremony the man with the helpless arm bent over and kissed the woman; then, a moment later, all hands took their seats, and the boat was pulled rapidly back toward the shore.

As soon as it grounded upon the beach the trio disembarked and disappeared in the cover of the fringe of trees, and nothing was left for Jeff Davis Dump but to "gib it up so" and return to the cabin.

It was with great difficulty that he could contain the discovery he had made until Sierra Sam should awaken in the morning, but he managed to keep it down by remaining awake and sitting at the doorway of the cabin in a state of retrospective cogitation.

When Sam arose the next morning he was of course treated to a vivid narration of the occurrence of the previous night, which he listened to in not a little surprise, without remarking a word in answer, much to Jeff's disgust, for he had spread it on as thick as possible, expecting to rather electrify his hearer.

"You needn't work to-day," Sam simply said, as the darky concluded, "but devote your attention to caring for the child. If a Chinaman comes here and asks for the child, see that

you do not give her up without my permission." Then he wandered down to the lake to bathe his hands and face, leaving Jeff to prepare the morning meal.

"Dem yar fac's jes' cut de boss like a razzor, an' rather dan admit de corn he wouldn't say nuffin," Jeff consoled himself. "Spec's he'll be as grum as a greedy 'skeeter on a fresh nigger for de next ten days."

Sierra Sam did not appear in the most pleasant mood on his return from the lake, and ate a few mouthfuls of breakfast in silence, after which he rose and put on his hat and coat and equipped himself with rifle and revolvers.

"I am going into town for awhile to-day," he said, and left the cabin.

Straightway he entered the mining-camp, as if there had been no trouble the night before.

In front of the Galoot's Goal he met the giant Jake Gouger, who was engaged in reading a notice which had evidently been recently tacked up on the outer wall of the saloon.

There being no one in the vicinity aside from Gouger, Sierra Sam paused and read the notice over the former's shoulders.

It was written in a graceful style of chirography, and ran as follows:

"OFFICE OF LADY LIL, }
Professional Road-Agent. }

To the Citizens of Bowie:

"GENTS—Allow me to take this method of expressing to you my disgust of you, who in the guise of men make up the most supreme gang of nincompoops I ever had the pleasure of meeting. By chance last night I saw the conflict between a number of your hot-headed crew and one Sierra Sam, and as a matter of course I was tickled to see him lay out a half a hundred or so of your chaps for calling him my humble self, although I am not flattered that the man Sam should be chary of wearing so prominent and honorable a title as that of Lady Lil. Let me inform you, however, that whenever you catch me in Bowie you can whistle, as I'm but a weak woman, unable to imitate Sierra Sam's example. All I want of you Bowievillians is your gold, and I'll get it, too, you bet. Yours forever,
LADY LIL."

There it was, in plain black and white, where every one could read it, the communication of this female footpad who termed herself Lady Lil the daring road-rider who had stopped and robbed more than a score of stages on the Bowie trail.

"Durn my mule's appetite fer oats ef that ain't ther best thing I've read sence I read about A, B, C, in ther Primer!" the Fejee of the North-west cried, slapping his thigh, excitedly. "That clears you as cl'ar as clear kin be, Sam!"

"I am not so sure of that. These Bowievillians may not see fit to view matters in that light," Sam replied. "I could hardly blame them if they were to lay 'most any plan for my destruction, after the clean-out I gave 'em, last night."

"Et war just gee-lorious!" Gouger declared, with emphasis. "I couldn't 'a' done better myself. Great toothsome Fejees, but you did lay 'em out, though, an' I'll war tew breeches ef thar ain't the skeartest passel o' men in this town, at prisent, o' any burg in the range. Don't ye worry yerself. They realize that they've no use o' foolin' wi' ther bizness-end uv an 'arthquake, an' they're of a decided disposition ter let ye politely alone, you bet."

But Sam was not quite convinced on this score. He could not readily believe that these men of Bowie would pass the wholesale defeat by, without making another attack upon him; he knew that it would be hardly human for them to resist a temptation to avenge those of their fellow-citizens who had fallen by his hand.

He entered the Galoot's Goal for a cigar, but not seeing anything of Capitola, he soon took his departure, and wandered aimlessly about the camp.

"She is perhaps with her newly and romantically-made husband," he muttered, "if so be the nig's view of the lake proceeding is right. Fool I have then been, to put any faith or trust in her! She is false like nearly all the rest of the world, if it is true that she has married Max Montague. But I will not accept merely circumstantial proof. I must be convinced."

During his rambles, he came face to face with Louise Berkley, for the first time since her arrival in Bowie.

They came together near the mouth of one of old Silas Stork's "drifts" in the mountain side, and each involuntarily paused, their eyes meeting in a strange gaze.

There was a silence of a moment; then Miss Berkley spoke. She had evidently waited for him to speak first but he was not inclined to.

"Well, Mr. Gilbert Vane, we have met, since you would not answer my note," she said, in a

business-like manner, that showed she was not afraid to speak, whenever she had occasion so to do. "I am exceedingly glad to see you."

"I am sorry I cannot say so, in regard to you!" Sam replied, with a tinge of sarcasm in his tone. "Besides, I do not happen to be Gilbert Vane."

"Oh! you don't, eh? Well, times and names change, sometimes, once in a few years. I am sure you will not deny that you once laid claim to the name of Gilbert Vane?"

"Very likely, but the name was fictitious."

"To serve a detective's purpose, yes. Well, what may your name be, now?"

"It may be Schuyler Froman—but it is not," Sam returned, dryly.

Miss Berkley grew as white as death;—she staggered, as if faint—she shuddered.

"Don't!" she gasped, putting up her hands. "I am aware that you know the terrible secret, though I never knew it, until you had left Stockton."

"Well?"

Sam apparently had no intention of helping along the conversation.

"Well," she pursued, "I must thank you for not betraying me. I have suffered years of torture, in fear you would."

His eyes gleamed coldly.

"You will suffer more, in eternity," he said, grimly. "I found out your crime of murdering Schuyler Froman, the night I quitted your society forever; but not wishing to create a sensation, just then, I pulled out without giving you up to the law. Since then, I have been too busy."

There was not much assurance for the future in his speech.

"You have been busy," she said, in an angry tone. "You have not eluded me, in coiling your net, however. I am able to tell you just why you are here in Bowie, even if the dull citizens cannot."

"Indeed!" he said, elevating his eyebrows, inquiringly.

"Yes, I can. You came here just in advance of us, and very naturally, you came in search of Captain Croix, the noted California counterfeiter."

"Well, then, I didn't go far wrong, eh?" he said, coolly. "Croix is here!"

CHAPTER XI.

STOPPED IN THE GULCH.

For Louise Berkley to deny the assertion of the Californian was folly, as she well knew, and so she accepted it with the best grace possible.

"I am as well aware of the fact as yourself," she admitted, "and wonder that you have not already attacked him, as is your intention, sooner or later."

"I shall shorten up his rope sooner than will be agreeable to him, no doubt," Sam replied. "Does he know me?"

"No—that is, he is not sure, by any means. He believes that Jack Keene, whom the counterfeiters poisoned and threw into a well, is dead, and though your appearance is a source of much annoyance, I guess he is firmly convinced that you are not his enemy."

"It is well, and even better so, perhaps, until I get ready," the Californian remarked. "Have you anything further to say?"

"Yes. I want to ask you to forgive and forget that which drove you from me, and let me try once more, and anew, to win back your love?"

She spoke earnestly, eagerly, thrillingly.

"I never had a particle of love for you—nothing but commonplace friendship—and even that expired when I learned that you had been married once before; and murdered your husband, for his supposed wealth. Luckily you got nothing in return but the comfort of knowing that you had secured for yourself a ticket to hell!"

He turned and retraced his steps into the village, not pausing to see what effect his words had had.

Louise Berkley did not faint, although the ominous words of the Frontier Ferret caused her to stagger.

"May the wolves of ill-luck pursue you!" she gasped, as she watched him depart. "Bloodhound though you are, I will not submit to your superiority without a struggle. Even though you hold the people at bay, and make them stand in awe of you, I do not fear you. If I do not plot your destruction, you will mine, so I cannot pass by the opportunity of striking you a disabling blow, when possible."

She went back to the hotel, her face wearing a wicked expression, and her eyes gleaming fitfully.

She found Judge Berkley seated in the main apartment of their ill-furnished suit of rooms, engaged in punishing a bottle of wine, while he perused an Eastern paper.

"Well, what have you seen to-day, girl?" he demanded, gruffly, without raising his spectacled eyes to look at her.

"I have seen a ghost of the past!" the young woman replied.

He started and gazed at her sharply.

"A ghost of the past!" he gasped. "What do you mean, Louise?"

"I mean just what I say. I have seen and talked with Gilbert Vane, the only man, except you who knows that I had to do with the death of Schuyler

Froman, whom I met and married while at school in Stockton!"

"Bad, girl—very bad! I thought you told me he was dead, and that that secret was buried forever, between us!"

"I took your word for it that he was dead, for you told me he was!"

"I—I tell you that Gilbert Vane was dead? You are crazy, girl!"

"Not in the least," Louise replied. "You told me that Jack Keene, the detective, had been done away with—and know you that the Gilbert Vane I knew, and the Jack Keene who was after the Croix counterfeiters, were one and the same person."

A fearful oath escaped the judge.

"How long have you known this?" he demanded, savagely.

"Since you told me of Keene's tragic death; and believing best to let the past bury the past," the girl responded, with a shudder, "I never told you the difference."

"And you tell me you have seen this sleuth-hound Keene, and talked with him?"

"Not ten minutes ago. He is here in Bowie under his real name—Sam Slocum, but is better known as Sierra Sam. He knows of our being here—he came here expecting we would step into his trap, and sure enough, we did, and are caged! Sooner or later, arrest stares us in the face—you for being the chief of the boldest band of counterfeiters that ever infested California—I for being the murderer of my own husband! Undenially we are caged!"

Judge Berkley arose and paced the floor, his face the scene of many contending emotions.

"Not necessarily caged yet!" he hissed between his clinched teeth, with a curse. "We must hurry up matters, and make our escape from this infernal town, ere he springs the trap upon us. Did he threaten any immediate hostility?"

"No; he seemed to have no fear of our escaping him, as well he may have none; for if it is true that he is the road-agent Lady Lil, then he of course has every avenue of escape securely guarded, so that we cannot get away from his vengeance."

"Perhaps you are right. The fellow is sharper than lightning, and it will go hard with us if we allow him to surrender us to the tender mercies of the law. Something must be done!"

"You never spoke so truthfully in your life!" Louise Berkley declared with emphasis. "In Sam Slocum we both have an unrelenting foe, whom it will tax our ingenuity to overcome, if indeed we are that fortunate. He is a man of men, and men fear him. He is a marvel of courage, skill and sagacity, and knows of no defeat."

"Yet we must defeat him!"

"We must kill him! Nothing but his death will ever save us—you from imprisonment for life, or death—me from the gallows."

Judge Berkley nodded his head.

"Yes, he must die!" he gritted, facing her, with pallid countenance, "and we must form our plans and execute them at once, lest he strikes us when we are not prepared. You are capable of great craft, girl—go ahead and tell me a good plan!"

After leaving Louise Berkley, Sierra Sam entered the upper gulch beyond the town, in quest of game, for he had noted the fact that the cabin larder was in need of a fresh supply of meat.

After rambling through the mountain fastnesses for a couple of hours, and securing nothing but a couple of rabbits, he once more sought the main gulch, and turned his footsteps toward Bowieville.

But he had not advanced via the main gulch more than a mile, when there suddenly rose on all sides of him a score or more of men, coming as though risen from the earth.

They were all masked, attired in top boots, corduroy pantaloons and red shirts, with slouch sombreros upon their heads, and belts about their waists, which contained small arsenals of weapons.

In his grasp each man held a repeating rifle, bearing upon the Californian.

So instantaneous and complete was the surprise that Sierra Sam could do no better than stop and gaze about him in astonishment.

He saw that no Bowieville crowd confronted him, now, whom he could attack and clean out at his own convenience.

"Well, gents, what's the matter?" he asked, leaning composedly upon his own rifle, and looking first from one to the other coolly. "One would naturally suppose that something is about to happen."

"Well, if ye ain't a cool 'un!" one of the outlaws exclaimed. "Of course there's something going to happen! Why don't ye skeer up, an' get flusterated?"

Sam smiled vaguely.

"Probably for the reason that I don't happen to be one of the skeery sort," he said, good-humoredly. "May I inquire why I am honored by a visit from your august body?"

"Sartin! We're the road-agents of Lady Lil, we aire, an' we jest dropped inter yer way ter ax ye ef ye couldn't donate a penny toward educating the heathen of Injy!" the spokesman answered, with a chuckle at his own attempt to be facetious.

"Your cause is admirable!" Sam retorted, "and by making an inventory of my present moneyed possessions I dare to presume that you will realize about fifty cents."

"Well, durn it, if I had 'a' know'd ye war so broke I'd not 'a' bothered with you," the road-agent said, in disgust. "Are ye sure that's the extent o' your pile?"

"Quite positive."

"Then hand it over, and light out fer Bowie."

"If you are at all anxious for it, you'd better come and get it!" Sam suggested. "I'm one of the laziest

men in seven counties, and never raise a finger unless it is for 'make.'

The road-agents exchanged glances. They were evidently not in favor of this proposal.

"I guess we don't keel enough about the sum to get in reach o' your fists, my friend," the spokesman said. "By the way, here comes her ladyship, the 'boss.' She can settle to suit herself."

Sam looked up the gulch, and saw the notorious Lady Lil riding toward them.

She was mounted upon a coal-black horse, but otherwise looked just the same as when she and her band had attacked the stage the night of the Berkleys' arrival in Bowie.

Sierra Sam surveyed her critically as she rode up, but could not remember that he had ever met with such a character before, although he could not decide for a certainty, as her face was masked and she wore a mustache.

This, he was satisfied, was false, as there was no semblance of beard upon her chin, which was decidedly feminine in appearance.

She galloped gracefully up to within a few feet of her circle of agents, and, drawing rein, swept the scene with her eagle gaze, an exclamation escaping her lips as she saw Sierra Sam.

"Hello! what does this mean, Paul?" she exclaimed. "Why have you stopped this man, sir?"

"And why not?" asked the road-agent who had previously addressed Sam. "We don't make distinctions, do we? One man's rhino is as good as another's; and, by hooky, this pilgrim's pile only aggregates a half-dollar, he tells us."

"You are fools!" Lady Lil cried, in a sharp voice. "Do ye know who you've halted here?"

"I reckon we don't stop fer introductions," Paul allowed, with a chuckle which was villainous.

"Nevertheless, you should look before you leap. This man you've innocently been fooling with is the chap who cleaned out the crowd down in the camp; this is Sierra Sam, the best man for his inches who hangs out around these parts—you bet!"

The men looked astonished, and of one accord moved back a pace.

At which Sierra Sam laughed.

"Don't be frightened, gents," he called out; "I'm not dangerous except when I'm touched off. You should use discretion, ma'am," with a glance at Lady Lil, "and not alarm your disciples."

"I wonder not that they shrink from a man who can lay out his score of men single-handed," Lady Lil replied, "and live to tell of it. You deserve more compliments than you are ever likely to get for the act, and did you have a thousand in your pocket, I'd scorn to touch it. You can take your departure, sir, and I shall endeavor hereafter to convince the people of Bowie that Sierra Sam is not Lady Lil, the road-agent."

"I'm much obliged, I'm sure," Sam replied, placing his rifle across his shoulders and striding down the gulch toward the mining town.

He never was more puzzled in his life, and twice gazed back to get a parting view of the female road-agent.

"Strange that she or he—whichever it may be—should give me such an exceptionable discharge from custody," he muttered, as he strode along. "I came here to Bowie to capture old Croix, the counterfeiter, alias Judge Berkley, at the instance of the detective bureau; but hang me if I expected to get mixed up in so much mystery. It isn't one fog to me, but it's several, all of which I am inclined to believe will develop into a stranger denouement than that of any other adventure I ever got into. There's the mystery about Capitola Carson and the fellow Montague; there's a mystery concerning the child; then there's one about the midnight marriage on the lake, and still another about this female robber. I fancy I've the gripe that will hold the key to unlock some of this mystery, and that key is a living affair, embodied in the anatomy of one Jeremiah Mugg. Ha! ha! the shrewd and scheming rascal does not remember me, or that I was witness to a certain little transaction in New Orleans a few years ago, or he would not be so conspicuous; nor have I carried a certain little document in my pocket all this time for nothing. Mugg must serve me as a phonograph, or I'll play muggings with him. I think I couldn't have stumbled across a better man to answer my demands."

With these thoughts in his mind, he went back to Bowieville and spent the rest of the day in lounging about the different resorts.

Just at evening he was standing outside the post-office, where were also a dozen or more loungers, when some one gave a cry, and a moment later a band of horsemen dashed down through the main street of the camp from the direction of the lake, and were gone from view up the gulch almost before any one could comprehend what had happened, so furiously did they ride.

Every man was masked, and at the head of the party dashed Lady Lil, the road-agent.

As they swept past the post-office she swung her sombrero above her head, and cried, high above the clatter of the horses' feet:

"Hurrah! Long live Lady Lil, the road-agent!"

The miners heard it, and drew weapons and fired after the bold outlaws, but without effect.

Lady Lil had kept her word to the California detective; she had shown to the Bowievillians that Sierra Sam and Lady Lil were two distinct and different persons!

But who was Lady Lil?

CHAPTER XII.

A CLAIMANT FOR CHERRIE.

If hot-headed and reckless to a fault, the bards of Bowie were not afraid to acknowledge the "corn"

when it pinched them, and no sooner had the news of the outlaw dash spread through the camp, than the citizens thereof turned out *en masse* and sought Sierra Sam.

Then there was a spell of apologizing to the Californian such as he had never before known, and he was freely forgiven for his slaughter, even by men whose arms he had broken, heads cracked and faces flattened.

Even the first of the "wilted," the gigantic Fejee of the Nor'-west, was present, and though in his unbounded joy he wrung Sam's hand with all his might, the son of the Sierras simply smiled at his efforts to make an impression.

"Your zeal is commendable, Jake," our Sam remarked, dryly, "but your fin needs a course of education in a blacksmith shop! For instance, like this," and he gave Gouger's hand a "return-ticket" that made him roar lustily, to the amusement of the bystanders.

"Oh! oh! oh! fer heving's sake let up!" he yelled; then, when Sam did let go, a broad grin took the place of the look of agony upon his face. "Oh! ye kan't rile me, Sammy, even ef ye squeeze me inter pomice. I'm yers till ther great Gabriel toots his trumpet; but, great toothsome Fejee, you've got a grip like a forty-hoss-power old maid onto a prospective husband."

As soon as he could conveniently, Sam left the enthusiastic crowd and sought his own cabin on the lake-shore.

He found that Jeff had supper ready, and so the trio sat down and ate heartily, little Cherrie seeming quite at home, but being of a reticent nature, she said but little, and the most of that to Jeff.

After supper Sierra Sam coaxed her to come and sit on his lap outside the cabin, while he smoked his pipe, Jeff building a bonfire to furnish light and keep off loneliness, till the moon came up—for darkness had many terrors to the sable son of the South.

"So your name is Cherrie Carson, is it?" Sam remarked. "That's a pretty name. You've been up in the mountains, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," was the answer.

"Who did you live with, there?"

"The Chinese woman, sir. She whipped me, hard, and I ran away."

"Indeed! Do you know where your papa is?"

"No, sir. I want to find papa."

"Do you know where your mamma is, little one?"

"In heaven, sir."

"Ah! were you ever here, before this?"

"I don't know, sir."

"How came you with the Chinese? do you know that?"

"No, sir, please. I awoke there."

Sam desisted from further questioning, for he heard approaching footsteps, and a moment later Capitola Carson darted in upon the scene, and snatched the child up in her arms, covering its face with kisses.

"Oh! my darling! my sweet dear little child!" she cried, rapturously. "Oh! Mr. Slocum, how can I ever thank you enough for finding my precious Cherrie. I am sure I was never so grateful in my life!"

"Jefferson Davis Dump, here, is entitled to what thanks you have to dispense with, as he found the child wandering and took it in," Sam replied, less cordially than was his wont in addressing her.

"Mr. Dump, I thank you sincerely. If I can ever accommodate you with a favor, do not forget to ask it," Capitola said. "Mr. Slocum, I am so glad you have been recognized in a favorable light by the people. It is so much nicer, than to be at swords' points."

"Indeed, yes; I am quite satisfied with the result," Sam responded. "You too must be happy—"

"But shall nottee be happee long!" a vindictive voice cried, and the Chinese money-lender sprang forward, out of the darkness. "Thattee child belong to me. Melican woman no ownee child. It belong to Hong-Kong John!"

"Oh! no! no! no!" Capitola screamed, pressing the child to her breast, in affright. "It is not yours! You shall not take her from me."

"Den Melican woman givve Hong-Kong John two t'ousan' dollee!" the Celestial cried, fiercely; "two t'ousan' dollee, or Melican child go with Hong-Kong John."

"I do not owe you that amount—I never will pay you a cent over what I owe you, which is one thousand dollars!" Capitola cried, tears of indignation standing in her eyes. "I have not the money, now. You may tear me to pieces but you shall not have my little Cherrie!"

"Certainly he shall not!" Sam said, sternly, rising to his feet. "You need have no fear, lady. As to you, you pig-tailed pirate, if you seek to make this lady any further trouble, I'll pick you up and throw you through your infernal skin. How much does this lady owe you?"

"Two t'ousan' dollee!" John replied, doggedly.

"You lie. I heard you say a thousand dollars, in your shop, a few nights ago. There's your money, sir," and the Californian drew a roll of bills from his pocket, and cast them at the Celestial's feet. "Take it, sir, and get you out of this neighborhood as quick as your legs are capable of carrying you or I'll guarantee you'll never see another sunset."

"Muchee 'bligee!" the Celestial grinned, eagerly snatching up the money, and skurrying away.

Capitola burst into tears, when he was gone.

"Oh, Mr. Slocum, you ought not to have done that," she sobbed. "You are too kind to me, whom you know so little of. It may be a good while ere I can win enough to repay you!"

"You need never win a cent to repay me, as I would not take it," Sam replied, quietly. "For the child's sake, I give it its freedom, and you are wel-

come to all the enjoyment thereof. There is one favor, however, I wish."

"Oh! sir, what is it?"

"Give me the child—at least for the present."

"Oh! no! no! I could not do that—indeed I could not. I am surprised at your request."

"It is both for your sake and the little one's that I make it. You are now married a second time, and I could not bear to see that innocent misused by a step-father!"

She staggered back, as if she were shot, a deathly pallor coming over her face.

"My God, Mr. Slocum, what do you mean? I am not the mother of this child—I am not married a second time, nor have I ever been married!"

"Then what was that scene on the lake, last night at moonlit midnight? Tell me that?" he said.

"I cannot, sir; I do not know what you mean, as the One above will bear me witness!"

She faced him, unflinchingly. Her cheeks were now burning, and her eyes had in them a look Sam had never seen there, before—a look of commingled truth, injured honor, and indignation.

Sierra Sam stood with folded arms, studying the picture as one in a dream, for he realized that all his doubt was undeserved.

"I am pleased to believe you, never to doubt, again." Then he stepped closer to her. "You know my great passion for you, and you will forgive me. Go; take with you the child. You have told me it was not yours—you have told me that you have never been married, and I will believe you. I will accept without question the mystery of your young life, until you choose to come forward and explain it to me, and give me my reward!"

Then eye met eye in an expression of undying love, and with a quivering sob Capitola turned and fled from the spot, carrying the child in her arms, which Slocum's kindness had saved from the custody of Hong-Kong John.

"After all, I have won," Sierra Sam mused, looking after her. "I have been suspicious, and am cured. Henceforth no man's testimony can alter my opinion of yonder peerless girl's purity and goodness."

When he turned to look for Jeff, he saw the darky seated in the doorway of the cabin, his head bowed in his hands, as if he were troubled about something.

"Well, well! wake up, here, Nicodemus—what's the matter with you?" the Californian cried, shaking him by the shoulder. "I hope you're not love-sick!"

"Dat's jes' w'at's de matter wi' dis yar child, fo' suah, boss," Jeff said, looking up, solemnly. "Maybe youh don't think 'c'ase a pusson is under an eclipse dat he's got any heart, but I jes' done gone tell you dat I had de purtiest gal dat ebber chewed gum, down in Atlanta. She wasn't no common nigger, neither, but jes' as yaller as beeswax, an' she lubbed dis yar child to suffocation. But alas! she cotched de inumps from Johnsing's gal Suke, and it wa'n't no use—she jes' pined away an' died, an' went ober to de New Jerusalem, leavin' dis yar chile heer all alone—boo-hoo-hoo!"

And off into a loud and genuine crying spell, went Jeff.

Sam knew him well enough to believe that there was no deception about the matter, for he had often seen the darky in downcast moods, as if he were troubled by some vision of the past.

"Never mind, Jeff," he said, laying his hand upon the darky's head, "don't mourn for them that's gone, but pray for them that's living in sin. We must all pass away some day, and even though we know that we have broken our Creator's commandments, we still have a chance while life lasts to repent and pray that our earthly deeds may be forgiven by Him who giveth and who taketh—Him who offers even sinners hope if they truly repent and come to him in the fullness of the believer's faith."

Then, with a sober and thoughtful expression, the Californian went into the cabin, feeling better at any rate for the words he had spoken.

Where is the man, no matter whatsoever be his sinful career, who does not feel better for tendering even a few words of good advice to a fellow-creature in the trust that it may help the recipient along the thorny path of life, even though the speaker's path be even more hedged with rankling thorns and his future doubtful?

Sierra Sam did not sleep well. He seemed to feel imbued with a premonition of some impending danger, and was uneasy and restless.

It was after midnight when he suddenly awoke and felt a hand gently shaking him, and a voice whispering: "Sh! 'sh! make no noise."

He sat up and saw a person standing in front of him, whom he first took to be Capitola, but he noted an instant later that he was mistaken, for the intruder wore a mask, and was none other than Lady Lil, the road-agent.

"Sh!" she repeated, in a whisper, "don't wake the nigger, but rise and come with me, for I want you to bear witness to something. Do not be afraid. No harm shall come to you, I'll guarantee, nor to any one else."

He thought of her leniency to him some hours before, and at once decided to accommodate her.

So arising and putting on his hat and securing revolvers, he followed her softly from the cabin.

Once outside, they walked along together until they came to where two other men stood—another road-agent, for one, and Jeremiah Mugg.

"So far so good," Lady Lil said, as she saw these men. "Now, Messrs. Slocum and Mugg, if you will come with us to the cabin of Montague, the owner of the Little Sunshine mine, all that will be required of you will be to watch a little game of cards and see that it is played straight."

In great surprise the two men followed the lead of their masked acquaintance, neither one speaking, for in truth they knew not what to say.

Inside of ten minutes they reached Montague's shanty and entered the only room the place afforded. It was lit by a couple of candles and rudely furnished.

Montague sat at a table in his shirt and pantaloons. He had evidently but recently got out of bed. Just opposite him sat a road-agent, who held a cocked revolver in each hand ready for business.

Montague uttered an oath when he saw who entered.

"Yes, I'm back," Lady Lil announced in a business way. "I am sure you cannot be dissatisfied, Monty. I've brought you two townsmen, who will act as umpires for you, while my fellows will see that I do the square thing—or still better, one of your men can watch with one of mine and *vice versa*."

"What does this mean?" Sierra Sam asked.

"It means that I want this man's superfluous cash, without robbing him of it. He has five thousand dollars—I have my life, which I put up as an offset!" Lady Lil cried. "If I win his money, I will take his money, and go. If he wins the game, he shall have the privilege of taking my worthless life, or handing me over to the law, as he chooses."

"Being forced into this proceeding, I shall take your life, if I win!" Montague growled, producing a pouch of gold and some bills.

They took their seats, and the watchers their positions.

It was just twenty minutes of two when the game began.

They played carefully but fast, neither seeming to have a desire to cheat.

At sharp two o'clock the game was won, and announced by the four watchers' voices, in chorus:

"The money is Lady Lil's, who has won it fairly, according to the best of our judgment!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MARRIAGE.

THE game was ended—Sam and Mugg at once took their departure, as did Lady Lil, the road-agent, and her followers.

Sam went back to his cabin, and passed the remainder of the night without sleeping, for the events of the last few hours had been too exciting to him, to warrant his getting drowsy.

When morning dawned, he went up to the town, to learn if there was any news, and there was.

The Galoot's Goal had not opened doors, and its fair mistress, Capitola, was nowhere to be found. What had become of her no one seemed to know, as she had not been seen since the saloon had been closed for the night.

Sam received the intelligence with no outward show of emotion, but a feeling of regret weighed down his heart.

"She has gone, and I, like a brute am the cause," he mused. "She knew she could not marry me, and rather than that we should live within sight of each other, as strangers, she has gone away. I wonder if she will return?"

He could not believe it, and when asked by the miners what should be done with the saloon, he recommended that it be closed, for a time at least, until further developments.

The news of Capitola's strange disappearance seemed to affect the miners and other citizens with a feeling of gloom, for as 'boss' of the Goal she had won a strong place in their respect and admiration, and to know that she was gone was to greatly regret her.

And this was not the only bit of news that pervaded the precincts of Bowie's little burg, that morning.

Another rumor was afloat, and that was to the effect that Miss Louise Berkley, the California lady, was at sunset, that day, to marry the old man of millions, Silas Stork. This created a decided sensation.

Judge Berkley was abroad, earlier than usual, in elaborate attire. He called in nearly every one he met to "have something," to the success of the bride-elect, and after extending a cordial invitation to everybody to be present at the ceremony, the judge made his way to the shanty of one Zeke Zeilley, who lived at the upper outskirts of the town—a noted criminal and wretch, this man Zeke, whose hand was said to be dyed with the life-blood of more than one innocent person, and who had often said he would rather do a murder than a hard day's work—a dark, swarthy, ugly-looking human being of filthy garb, whom even the worst roughs of Bowie shunned and feared.

Berkley found him in his rude shanty, seated at a table with a bottle of whisky and a piece of venison before him, a bleary-eyed ruffian, whose look was decidedly wolfish.

He and the judge evidently had met before, however, for the latter at once helped himself to a chair, in a business-like manner, and took a handful of gold coin from the pocket of his coat.

"Well?" Old Zeke growled, interrogatively.

"Yes, the time is at hand," the judge said, with a knowing nod. "The marriage is to take place, to-night, just at sunset. I'll have it arranged so the last words are spoken at precisely ten minutes past six o'clock. At fifteen minutes past six, you are to fire the shot which is to earn you your money, of which here is fifty dollars—the other fifty shall be paid you when you have earned it."

"Reerect!" the ruffian replied, raking in the coin, greedily. "Ye can bet I'll do the thing up scientific. Ye want a dead sure go made of it, eh?"

"Of course. There must be no half-way business about it, you mind!"

"All right. Leave that to yer 'umble sarvent," Zeke said, with a grin that was horrible. "I opine I've got in my work on more'n one job, Cap, in good shape, an' I presume I kin wrastle yourn off wi'out deefikilty. At precise fifteen minutes arter six, ye say."

"At fifteen minutes after six, to-night," the judge repeated, as he arose and took leave of Bowie's human butcher.

Sierra Sam was as much interested by the news of the approaching marriage, as any one else, and took a turn about the town, his brain active in deep thought.

"My time is drawing near, to complete my mission, here," he muttered, "and I must strike while the iron is hot."

He went back to the village, and sought Jeremiah Mugg, to find that individual engaged in a game of poker with a tenderfoot, who had lately arrived, and was green "in the ways that are dark and the tricks that are vain."

"Come!" Sam ordered, authoritatively, as the lawyer looked up. "I want you, Mugg, on important business."

The lawyer threw up the game, and followed the Californian. He would have refused, no doubt, but dared not disobey, after having seen what he had of Sierra's invincibility.

Sam led the way to the Galoot's Goal and unlocking the door, they entered, and closed it behind them.

The miners had appointed Sam trustee of the place, and given the key into his charge.

After the two men were seated opposite each other at a table, Sierra Sam lit a cigar, and gazed at the pettifogger sternly.

"Mugg," he said, "do you know my object in bringing you here?"

"No, Sam'l, I can't say that I do," the lawyer replied.

"Well, I'll tell you. I came here for the sole purpose of converting you into a human automaton, who shall do my bidding. In the first place, I happen to know you, but you don't know me. I am Vampier, of New Orleans; you are Scriggins the scuttler!"

Mugg turned pale, but did not speak.

"You are wanted in N. O.!" Sam went on, "for scuttling some dozen trade ships, at the instance of a band of coast wreckers, and in my breast pocket I have a little document for your arrest, wherever found. But as the scuttling case has rather blown over, and hopes are given up of capturing you, I don't propose to trouble you providing you renounce all villainy, and become my aide as an under detective. You know much that I would know, and your liberty is your own, if you give me the benefit of your assistance."

A rather peculiar smile came over the lawyer's face.

"Yes, I know more than I am given credit for knowing!" he answered, "and I knew you from the moment I first saw you here, but believed you did not recognize me. I know why you come here also. I am only too glad to join forces with you, and henceforth renounce villainy, for I am heartily tired of the checkered existence I have been leading for years past."

"And I am glad to hear it," Sam said, seizing his hand. "Every one is liable to sin, but repentance is within their grasp, at all times until death. You know much, I am aware, and I want you to answer me some questions I shall ask you."

"No—do not ask me any. Come to the wedding ceremony to-night, and take my word for it, many will be answered that you would not ask. There will also be some denouements that you are not expecting, and your time will be at hand to arrest those whom you come here to secure."

"Very well. I will abide by your advice, and see what comes of it," Sam said. "I have suspicions of something that I think will happen, but will withhold them. But, tell me one thing—do you know aught of Capitola?"

"I do not. While I know much more about the strange girl and her history, than any other man in camp, I cannot account for her sudden disappearance."

"One more query—why is it that you appear to hold a grudge against the girl and a desire to crush her?"

"You are blind! She has not a stronger friend living, unless it be you. But, enough—for further developments wait!"

"Very well; I will do so."

Shortly after they left the saloon, and locked the door after them.

Judge Berkley met Mugg soon after the pettifogger separated from Sierra Sam, and stopped him.

"You are prepared to do the marriage job, this evening, I suppose?" the judge said blandly.

"Oh! most certing," Mugg assured. "It is one of my greatest accomplishments, this knot-tying act."

"There is another matter I wished to speak to you about: do you know whether Silas Stork has recently made his will or not?" the judge asked.

"The will is made, and in my possession, but is the funniest kind of a will you ever saw. It is an out and outer, you bet."

"And my daughter Louise is heiress to all the old man's wealth, eh?"

"Well, I should smile that your daughter jest about gits thar," Mugg allowed, bowing himself away with greatest suavity. "I am instructed, sir, to read the will immediately after the conclusion of the ceremony."

The judge went back to the hotel in great glee.

"It's all right!" he announced to Louise. "The old man has done everything all right, and now you want to get yourself fixed up to look your prettiest, so there won't get no hitch in the matter."

"But how about Sierra Sam? Have we nothing to apprehend from him?"

"I think not. At any rate, we shall have to run the risk, for I can conceive no plan, except open murder, by which we can get rid of him, until darkness comes again."

And so it was left.

And Louise Berkley made arrangements to marry old Silas Stork, that evening, for his money; for of course she could not care for him on any other account, despite the fact that she had twice paid him a visit and professed great respect and admiration for the infirm and crusty old miser-millionaire.

In the mean time Sierra Sam was not idle. Selecting a half dozen of the most honestly disposed miners of the town, he took them to one side and explained to them his professional calling and asked their assistance in capturing a noted criminal who was to be present at the wedding ceremony; and also that they should hold the prisoners in custody until he, Sam, could send to Sacramento for the proper authorities.

To all of this the miners agreed, and promised to be present at the ceremony and ready to respond to any call Sierra Sam should make.

Long before sunset that night the villagers began to collect in the vicinity of the miser's shanty, on the *qui vive* to witness the remarkable union of youth and old age.

Owing to the fact that Stork's cabin was small, the ceremony was to be performed upon the veranda in front, so that outside spectators could get a good view.

It was a motley assemblage, too. A good many strangers had come into the town from the neighboring "washes," and as good clothes and fashion were things unknown in Bowie, except among a very few, the audience was by no means elegantly accoutered, red shirts, slouch hats, mud-splashed pants and stogy boots predominating, to say nothing about polished bowies and six-shooters at every waist.

Gouger, the Fejee of the Nor'west, was not lacking. He came upon the scene shortly before the bridal party made their appearance, and sought out Sierra Sam, who occupied a rather retired position.

"Great toothsome Fejee, Sammy, they do tell me thar's goin' ter be a public splicin' hyar!" he exclaimed, gleefully. "An' in honor o' ther occasion I've went an' had my ha'r anointed wi' ther ile o' bergamont, price three bits, an' had my breath invoiced wi' Love Among the Roses, price five bits; an' now d'ye think thar'll be a likelihood o' my gittin' a chance ter kiss ther bride?"

"I wouldn't give much for your chance," Sam replied, dryly, "and I'd want a good salary to do the job if I got the chance were I you. You have a note in your hand—"

"Yes, an' it's for you. I nearly forgot," the giant replied, handing him a slip of paper.

Sam opened it and read what was written thereon. It was from Capitola, and ran:

"MR. SLOCUM—Do not make any disturbance until I have made mine, and oblige, Yours, "CAPITOLA."

The Californian put the missive in his pocket, a strange expression coming over his face.

"I think I see," he mused. "The suspicion I formed may not be groundless. This is twice she has in this manner checked me in a purpose; maybe it is better so."

Just then the bridal-party appeared on the veranda in front of Stork's shanty, and here they took their positions—Silas Stork and Louise Berkley standing together, and the judge not far away, while Jeremiah Mugg took a position just in front of the bridal-party, with a book opened in his hand.

There was a pause until the audience became in a measure silent; then Mugg, in a clear, loud voice, read the marriage service, and pronounced Silas Stork and Louise Berkley man and wife.

He then took from his pocket a legal-looking document!

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED CLIMAX.

"LADIES an' gentlemen!" he said, turning to the spectators, "I have been ordered by Mr. Stork to read to you his last will and testament, which I drew up for him. So with your kind attention I will proceed!"

Then, clearing his throat, he read the forepart of the singular will of the old miser:

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

"BE IT KNOWN TO ALL MEN—That being of sound mind, but knowing that my end draweth nigh, I, Silas Stork, do hereby make and publish my last will and testament. Being possessed of no earthly kin or relations, I do choose and make the sole heir of all my worldly goods, the—"

Mugg didn't finish just then—there was a sharp rifle report, and Silas Stork uttered a scream, threw up his arms, and toppled back to the floor, an ugly bullet-hole in his forehead.

And, most immediately following the shot, Zeke Zeilley, the murderer, staggered forward, half crazy from the effect of whisky, crying:

"The job's did, judge—give's the fifty dollars!"

Sierra Sam uttered a yell, and, leaping forward, knocked the ruffian to the ground, senseless.

Then, turning to his aides, he cried, sharply:

"Secure 'em, boys—they're answerable for this murder!"

And in another instant the two Berkleys were in custody.

Seeing the spell of amazement that possessed the crowd, Sam then advanced to the front steps, and took a position thereon.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he cried, "in the name of the law of the United States, I, Sam Slocum, have arrested this man and woman for a series of desperate crimes. Last but not least, the instigation of this foul murder, so unexpectedly perpetrated. I am an official detective, and have orders for their arrest. And now, before this crowd disperses, let the reading of Silas Stork's will be finished. Mr. Mugg, proceed!"

"Yes, read on!" Judge Berkley cried, defiantly, "and you'll find my daughter Louise is the heir. I plotted Stork's death, myself, so she could come into immediate possession, and she is innocent of complicity. But, her riches will buy her father's freedom. Ha! ha! ha!"

And he laughed like a madman. Louise Berkley leaned against the door-post, faint and white, closely guarded by one of the miners; but she made no denial of the judge's effort to screen her.

Mugg unfolded the will once more and began, the crowd listening attentively:

"Being possessed of no earthly kin or relations, I do choose and make the heir of all my worldly goods, the moneys and every thing included, the only daughter of my friend Judge Berkley, whose first name is Lillian—"

"Stop! stop!" Judge Berkley cried—"that should be Louise!"

"Silence!" Mugg cried.

"In witness whereof, I do hereby set my hand and seal, this the —th day of —, 18—.

"Signed, SILAS STORK.

"JOHN HEMMING, } Witnesses."

"MATHEW LEWES, }

"Tis false!" the judge cried, beside himself with rage. "It should be Louise instead of Lillian!"

"It is just as I was directed to write it in the presence of witnesses, and is legal. It don't matter to you, anyhow!" the lawyer cried. "Both you and your worthy daughter are liable to a rope for murder."

"And, if the Stork property belongs to Lillian Berkley, I might as well claim my own, now as at any future time, for I am Lillian Berkley, the only daughter of Judge Berkley," Capitola cried, stepping forward from the crowd.

"The woman he has given the name of Louise Berkley, is an impostor, and his second wife's first daughter by her first husband."

A cheer went up from the crowd.

Judge Berkley uttered a fearful oath, and whitened and trembled.

The girl noticed it, and her lip curled with scorn.

"Yea, tremble, you inhuman father!" she cried, "for well you may. You have run to the end of your rope, as I prophesied you would—you who should have been a father to your children, but was a brute—you who should have protected your children, but had your son convicted of one of your own murders, and would have seen him hung had I not rescued him! Oh! would to God I had never been born of such a father as you!"

And with tears streaming down her face, she turned and fled from the spot into the heart of the camp.

Sierra Sam at once ordered the prisoners taken to a strong cabin, and a heavy guard placed over them. Louise had fainted, and had to be carried. Other miners looked after the dead mine-owner, and Zeke Zeilley was also taken and locked up.

While the party were en route to the primitive jail, a man came running up, bare-headed and excited.

"Stop! What's the meaning of this outrage?" he cried, and he was none other than the owner of the Little Sunshine mine, Montague. "That woman, whom you are taking to jail, I understand is my wife!"

"And my prisoner! She is a murderess, and I, Slocum, detective, of California, have a warrant for her arrest, and also one for her step-father here," Sierra Sam responded, calmly.

"And, in addition to that, the woman is no more your wife than mine!" Mugg declared, triumphantly. "She has been married three times before, to my positive knowledge, and two of her husbands are living undivorced!"

"Then, curse you, why did you marry me to her upon the lake the other night? We had been betrothed ever since I met her in Stockton, where she was at school."

"I married you, Max Montague, alias Guy Arundel, because you axed me, and 'cause I knew it wouldn't hold. You refused to lend me two bits one day to get a drink of whisky with, and behold! I sought revenge!" Mugg answered, with a derisive laugh.

In hearty disgust Montague turned away amid the hoots of the crowd, and the jail was reached without further incident.

It was a strong affair, with one stout door and no windows, and Sam concluded it would not be necessary to station a guard.

So the prisoners were bound and left under lock and key.

It had been a twenty-four hours of excitement to Sierra Sam, and he was tired when darkness set in, but resolved to see Capitola, if possible, before he turned in for the night.

On making inquiry, however, he learned that the ready money and bonds of the miser, which had been found buried beneath the shanty floor, had

been given to the girl, and after receiving it, she had turned over the mines to the superintendency of no less a man than Jake Gouger, and mounting her horse, had taken her departure from the town, promising to come back frequently, to collect the profits accruing from the mines. Of the child, Cherrie, the villagers knew nothing.

So Sam went back to his cabin in a rather gloomy state of mind.

"I'm fearful that I've set my heart on a vain object!" he muttered. "She has gone away, leaving no clew to her whereabouts, and I shall be much surprised if I ever hear from her again!"

But he did hear from her!

CHAPTER XV.

SIERRA SAM'S DISENCHANTMENT.

LATE that night, or rather, early in the morning, Max Montague heard a rap at his shanty door, and a rap too that had a very business-like sound.

Rising, and pulling on his pantaloons, he answered the summons, only to find Capitola standing just without the door.

"Well?" he demanded, gruffly, "what do you want?"

"I want you!" the girl replied, with emphasis, and she at the same time covered him with a cocked revolver. "I have come to square up accounts with you—so come right straight along, or I'll wing you, and then force you to go!"

She meant what she said too, it was evident.

"You talk foolishly. Have you got five thousand dollars?" he demanded.

"Yes, I have. Come!"

"Well, you'll have to wait till I put on my boots!" "No. I won't do anything of the kind. Come right along, bare-footed, or I'll shoot your toes off, and then shoot you in the bargain. It would be better for you to trifle with a wild-cat to-night, than with me!"

Montague came out of the shanty, having nothing on but his trowsers and shirt; not even a hat upon his head.

"You're mighty pert!" he growled, "since ye fell heir to Stork's lay-out, just through chance. I don't believe you've got the money, though!"

"Believe what you please. I have got the balance of the money with which to purchase my poor brother's freedom—so come on, at once, and set him free—you who took him from me, and have kept him, God only knows where, for over a year, the limit you gave me to raise the ransom for his life. I have raised it, and now I demand his release, or I'll give you a chance to visit a different clime than this, in short order."

"Pshaw! If you were to harm me the secret of your brother's prison would be lost forever!"

"By that threat have you held me at your will, ever since you captured my brother, as we were en route to Bowie. But, it will not work any longer. I've got the ransom you demanded, and will no longer be put off. Either I will see my brother to-night, or I'll put out your light, and never see him! That's as patent as pointed!"

"Well, give us your money, and you shall see your brother!" Montague growled, perceiving that he could no longer deal with her except at her own terms.

"Not a cent until I see Fred, alive and well. Then, I will pay you. You know my word is good—even as firm as my sisterly devotion!"

Without a word, they went down the gulch—passed by Slocum's cabin, and continued along the shore of the lake. After passing beyond it, they followed the gulch for half an hour—then branched off into a narrow ravine, in which they presently stopped, and the place was in front of a perpendicular wall of rock.

Taking a small key from his pocket, Montague thrust it into a crevice, when, lo! a rocky door swung open.

"Come out!" the mine-owner shouted into the aperture, and a moment later a tall young man, with full beard, but very thin in flesh, made his appearance, and he and Capitola became locked together in each other's embrace.

"There's your money, sir!" the girl cried, as she tossed a sack of coin upon the ground, when the rapturous greeting with her brother was over. "Take it and see to it that you are never seen again in Bowierville, or it will be the worse for you. You can never play brigand around these parts again, with the same success!"

Maybe two hours later, when it was the darkest hour before the dawn, owing to the late moon being obscured, Lady Lil, the road-agent, rode silently down into Bowie's slumbering city, followed by her full band, a good score in number.

Dark and grim the cavalcade looked, as they silently rode up to the jail, and dismounted.

To open the door was a matter of but a few minutes' work, and Lady Lil stepped within the threshold.

"Judge Berkley, if you be here, come, for your liberty is at hand," she announced.

The guilty couple eagerly obeyed, but shuddered when they saw the band of masked men.

Judge Berkley had roughed it long enough in the West to know that a band of masked men seldom visited a jail for any good purpose.

"Don't fear!" Lady Lil said, with a laugh, noticing his start. "This isn't a necktie party. We come to give you a chance for escape."

The Berkleys were then placed upon two extra horses; the road-agents remounted, and the cavalcade left Bowie's little town, as quietly as it had entered, no one at the time being the wiser for their visit.

Three days later the same cavalcade halted upon

an eastern prairie, and at the head of it were the judge and Louise, and Lillian and Fred Berkley!

And it was Lillian, whom we have known as Capitola, who spoke:

"Mr. Berkley—I cannot claim you as a father—here we part!" she said, sternly. "Before you lies the track to the eastward, and you are mounted upon strong horses. Go—you and your step-daughter—go, and see to it that you never again run across the paths of your sinned against children, lest you find not mercy. Go, and make the best of your life between now and death, in repentance!"

"Mr. SLOCUM: DEAR SIR—You will perhaps be surprised to receive this from me, but I could not go away, without telling you a few things. My career in Bowie is over. A few years ago, as you know, my father entered the counterfeiting business. My brother discovered it, and because he would not join the band, false evidence was brought up against him, through my father's instrumentality, and he was convicted of murdering a man he never saw, and sentenced to be hanged. At my solicitation, he did not give up the secret of father's guilt, even though death stared him in the face. The murderer was one of the counterfeiters. I did not know this, then. My brother's wife and I rescued Fred, and we all fled into the wilds, taking the name of Caeson. Fred's wife soon died, and he and I and little Cherrie, his child, were alone. We drifted about, here and there, and finally set out for Bowie. On the way Fred was captured by Max Montague, a former enemy, who threatened if I did not pay him ten thousand dollars ransom, within a year, in the mean time maintaining the greatest secrecy, he would turn Fred over to be hung. I came to Bowie and started the Goal; I mortgaged the child to the Chinaman, to get money to make the first payment; I even became a road-agent under the nom de plume of Lady Lil. And, now, I've freed my brother, and we have freed my father, and are going to let him fly for his life. I know you can never forgive me for this, Mr. Slocum, but as much as I love you I couldn't let my own father be hanged. Forgive and forget, and hope that we may meet in a far happier world, if never again in this. CAPITOLA."

Such was the letter Sierra Sam found upon his breast, the next morning after the fatal wedding!

And a few days later, accompanied by J. D. Dump, he packed up, and left Bowie forever, a sad, sorrowing man!

THE END.

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